

THE CHOSEN OF THE GODS

ANDREW SOUTAR



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THE CHOSEN OF THE GODS

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THE CHOSEN OF THE GODS

CHAPTER I

THE SECRET

MERCARA gasped in the pitiless white sun of an Indian noonday. The withered rice-fields stretched as far as the eye could reach, a tract of sun-blasted land over which the thin shadows of a few scattered mango trees rested like the ghosts of poverty and desolation. All life seemed to have been charred and blistered. The drowsy crooning of the cicada made the stillness all the more eerie, the more oppressive. The miserable ryots, for whom life itself depended on the yield of the rice-paddies, crouched in the slight shade of their mud-huts, like silent bronze idols ; their wide staring eyes were turned to the east. Rain, only rain, they prayed for—a few drops to moisten the crops till the monsoon burst ; only the sun—the pitiless, scorching, blinding sun—was given in answer. On the summit of the low-lying range of hills to the south sat the Spectre of Famine ; the tax-collector sat by its side.

One of the hovels stood away from the rest and a few yards from the mud of the river-bed.

The door was open wide, and in the shadow thrown against the side of the hut was a boy of twelve. He was squatting after the manner of natives, his abnormally long, thin arms encircling his bony knees, his chin resting on his hands. A mass of straggling black hair fell over a high, protruding forehead, and formed a sort of screen to a pair of eyes that looked out, hungrily and bitterly, at the whitened landscape. A weak, thin voice called from the hut :

“ Krishna ! Krishna ! ”

The boy slowly disengaged his hands and crawled into the hut, and to the side of the sick ryot, Goviandswamy.

“ Krishna, has the night come ? ” asked the old man, passing a skeleton hand wearily before his eyes.

The boy started with sudden concern, and, stretching himself on the rice-mat near the sick man, he looked long and anxiously into the fast-glazing eyes.

“ Yes, my father,” he said at last, “ the night has come.” The sunlight streaming through the open doorway mocked him as he spoke.

“ And Runga, the fakir—has he come ? ” asked Goviandswamy.

"No, my father, but he will come," said the boy.

The old man turned his head away with a despairing groan. "He will not come," he muttered. "He will not come to-night, and to-morrow will be too late. Call Wadi, the Eurasian."

The boy frowned sullenly and made no effort to rise from the bedside.

"Call him," said the old man imperatively.

"Runga will come," the boy urged; but even as he spoke the face of Wadi, the Eurasian, peered in at the doorway. It was a dark, evil face, and a gash in the upper lip revealed a set of irregular teeth, red-stained with betel-nut. He moved to the side of the dying ryot, glancing reproachfully at the frowning boy, who, muttering again that Runga, the fakir, would yet come, sidled to the door.

"Goviandswamy, you would speak with me alone," said Wadi, throwing a malignant look at the boy in the doorway.

Goviandswamy stretched forth a bony hand, and grasped the stooping man's dhoti. "Nearer," he whispered, seeking to draw him down. "Wadi, once you offered to serve me with your life."

The Eurasian nodded impatiently.

"You remember the night in Bombay when the Mohammedans rose?"

"Yes, yes," said Wadi, "I remember. You saved me from them, Goviandswamy. What is it that you would say to me now?"

"You are to be trusted, Wadi——"

"My life is yours, Goviandswamy."

"With a secret that may bring you the blessing of the gods or tortures worse than death?"

"I am ready," said Wadi, his lean fingers twitching at the rice-mat.

"Runga will come," wailed the boy at the door, but the ryot made only a feeble gesture of impatience.

"Come nearer, Wadi," whispered Goviandswamy. "The secret which I pass on to you is a secret——" He did not finish the sentence, for the boy Krishna leaped into the hut with a cry of "Runga! Runga!"

And with his snakes, and his ropes, and his "miracle" baskets, and all about him the pungent smell of the jungle, came Runga, the fakir. Before he bent down to the rice-mat he scrutinized the twisted face of the chagrined Eurasian, as though seeking quietly

to determine what he had learned from the dying ryot. Wadi rose and crept from the hut.

“ You are late, Runga.”

The fakir nodded, and pressed his fingertips on the eyelids of the sick man, breathing sharply at the discovery he made.

“ The secret, Goviandswamy ? ” he whispered.

“ It is here, Runga,” said the ryot, touching his waist-cloth—“ here, awaiting the Chosen. You are ready, Runga ? ”

The fakir bent down and whispered in the ryot's ear. Goviandswamy groaned. “ Then who, who is to take upon himself the mission ? ” he asked. Runga turned his eyes towards the doorway. Krishna, the boy, was sitting in the midst of the fakir's baskets and cobras. A white-headed snake had wriggled out of captivity, and was dancing and swaying before the eyes of the boy. With a cry of alarm Runga sprang towards the door, but before he could reach it Krishna had taken the reptile by the neck and replaced it in its basket. Not the slightest trace of fear rested on the boy's face, and he turned to laugh contemptuously at Runga.

.

"I have seen, Goviandswamy—seen with my own eyes. The secret is for him." Runga was back at the bedside of the dying ryot.

"But he is so young, Runga," the ryot pleaded.

"The gods are wise," said the fakir simply.

"Call him," said Goviandswamy feebly, and Krishna was brought into the hut. As he knelt by the dying man his eyes were turned inquiringly on the fakir, but Runga's face was buried in his hands.

"Krishna," said Goviandswamy in a low voice, "you are but a boy ; still, as Runga says, the gods choose wisely. Before another day breaks you will be alone in the world, and Runga will take you to Madras. There you will be committed to the care of one Kuppuswamy, to whom I tenderly commend you. Obey him as you would obey me, and seek to profit by his wisdom. You have been destined for high things, and here, in the presence of Runga, I charge you to perform them, cost what they may. This secret"—he unloosened a red skin belt from his waist and handed it to the boy—"is a secret of the gods. Guard it as you would guard your life itself, and when you shall have reached years of discretion and wisdom,

act as the message therein dictates. In all things be faithful to the Voices—the voices of those brave men who have laid down their lives for the Cause. Always they will be watching you, guiding you. To-day they are but six; to-morrow my voice will be blended in theirs.

A few sharp breaths, a few convulsions of the skeleton-like frame——

.

That night Runga, the fakir, and Krishna, the boy, slept in the forest on their way to Madras.

The day was breaking when Runga, aroused by the hissing of his captive reptiles, sprang to his feet and ran to the form of the sleeping boy.

“ Krishna ! Krishna ! ” the fakir called.

The boy lazily opened his eyes.

“ I am here, Runga,” he said simply.

“ And the belt—the belt ! ” cried the trembling fakir.

The boy sat up and, drawing aside his dhoti, revealed the fact that the secret had disappeared.

“ You need have no fear,” he said quietly.

“ Wadi guards it. See ! yonder lies the Eurasian.”

And so indeed he did, ten yards or more from the reed couch of the boy. Runga sprang towards the lifeless body. Gripped in a nerveless hand was the sacred belt, and two inches down from the tip of the Eurasian's chin was the blue-red mark where the snake, the *nulla pambu*, had struck !

Runga refastened the belt round the waist of the boy and bowed himself in prayer.

CHAPTER II

RACIAL PREJUDICE

KRISHNA had been two years in the house of Kuppuswamy.

While new and lasting impressions were being created daily on his young mind—a natural outcome of his changed environment—nothing seemed capable of eradicating the memory of those bitter years of semi-starvation that immediately preceded the death of his father. When the restfulness and plenty of his benefactor's house threatened most to overshadow the darkness of the past, there seemed to come through the two dead years the echoes of those cries of despair that fell from the parched lips of his father, as one real or fancied Government iniquity followed close on the heels of another.

His faculty for observation and inquiry was abnormal, and while Kuppuswamy cherished, in a measure, the ideals that had been but vaguely outlined for him by his friend Goviandswamy, he would frequently feign apathy that he might analyse more closely a mind that was fast bewildering him, philosopher and teacher that he was. Often, when he had deemed a question by

the boy nothing more than idle curiosity, the pertinence of it would suddenly strike him at a later period, and open up a new channel of thought.

Kuppuswamy was an influential vakil in the Madras High Court. By means which he preferred not to publish, not even for the encouragement of discontented compatriots, he had amassed considerable wealth. His mode of life was simple; his wants were few, and if there was philanthropy in his nature, it was exercised quietly and without a suspicion of ostentation. His tastes were fully satisfied by his books, his work, his dreams, and his child, Lakshmi, a girl of twelve, whose coming had meant the departing of Kuppuswamy's mate. There was an atmosphere of quiet comfort in the bungalow—a comfort that many European guests had envied. The vakil's friends were many and varied. Wealth is a wonderful eraser of racial scruples. But life with him had not always been so smooth and untrammelled. Sometimes of an evening as he sat on the veranda of the bungalow, Lakshmi at his feet, all trace of parental interest in her childish prattle would cease of a sudden. The half-finished cigarette would drop from

the slender fingers, the oval, intellectual head loll forward until chin touched chest, and the hard, bearded face assume a sadness of expression that was eloquent of bitter reflection.

When the child tired of asking unanswered questions, and wearied of the fairy talk of the drowsy cicada in the maples, she would turn to him for the story of his thoughts. And once he told her the tragedy of his childhood, although it was "all in a book of ancient India that he had read." The sympathy even of a child will sometimes ease a heavy heart.

The story was of a boy about Lakshmi's age who lived in the South-west among the rice-fields and the coffee plantations. The monsoon had failed to keep its season, and famine was rendered more hideous by the brutality of the zamindar, that privileged ruffian of Government creation. Driven to desperation by the failure of the crops that lay white-withered in the scorching sun, the hungry ryots awaited the coming of the collector as the hunted deer awaits the foremost hound.

The father of the boy "in the book" struck the first blow for emancipation—a vain and ill-considered blow. He and the

woman who shared his life paid the penalty. The scene was their boy's lifelong punishment. The terrorized ryots, full twenty strong, and armed with no more formidable weapons than those with which Nature had endowed them; a regiment of towering, bearded Sikhs, and a barefaced boy-officer, who shrieked commands as a woman shrieks when immodesty leads her into horseplay; a wild, merciless swinging of rifle-stocks, and then the score of brown, cowardly, accusing fingers levelled at the ringleaders; a quick, short trial, devoid of all semblance of justice, the asking and answering of a few curt questions, and man and wife stood together beneath the mango-trees, their faces turned to the east, her hand in his, the light of martyrdom in their flashing eyes, the sneer of contempt for this "justice" playing around their dilated nostrils; a shriek from the boy-officer, the hiss and spit of half a dozen rifles, a scream of pain from the faithful wife as she leapt high in the air and fell across the prostrate body of her man, who had died without a groan.

"And the boy, my father?" queried the weeping Lakshmi, when she had heard the tale thus far.

“ The gods were good, my child. He was befriended by one who received him into his house at the risk of losing his own liberty and privileges, such as they were. This man had a son of his own, who received the little stranger as he might have received a brother. The head of the house was a man of lofty thought and ideals. He was much given to study, and of an evening would impart to the two boys some portion of his store of knowledge. Together they grew into manhood, and together pursued their researches into the history of the people and the conditions under which they lived.”

“ And—— ? ”

“ Inquisitive child ! ” he laughed fondly. “ They married, and for many years their paths in life lay apart. The one had a son, the other a daughter, and the two were betrothed, as is customary among our people.”

“ And did they marry ? ”

“ O child of mine ! Did ever tongue move so freely, or mind so quickly ? No, my child, the two are but children this day : the boy an orphan, the girl—well, well, she is about thy age, child, and as fair of face.”

“ I should like to have known the boy,”

said the child simply, brushing away the tears from her eyes. "I wonder! I wonder!"

And Kuppuswamy, drawing her closer to him, sighed in the dying twilight.

It was into this house that Krishna, the son of Goviandswamy, came. To the child Lakshmi he was an enigma from the first moment of their meeting, when he gravely eyed her, and touched her long black hair, as though she were some new species of wild-cat. When she attempted to break through his reticence and interest him in her babyish fancies, he turned from her with a pitying smile and a beseeching glance at Kuppuswamy.

"Krishna is not as other boys," her father had said soothingly, as the child wept out her disappointment at his feet. "He is alone in the world, dependent on the studies of his youth for his bread as a man." And Krishna's eyes expressed his gratitude for the intervention.

But the philosopher was unprepared for the not unwelcome trap into which he had unwarily wandered.

"Yes," the boy cried, with an eagerness that stirred his whole frame, as the wind stirs the leaves of a forest, "I want to study; I want to think; I want to learn!"

“ And what do you wish most to learn ? ” Kuppuswamy asked quietly, thinking to gratify the wish in a single answer.

“ To learn ? ” The boy crept nearer to his benefactor, and with hands outstretched imploringly, “ I want to learn the meaning of racial prejudice,” he said solemnly. “ Yes, that’s it—racial prejudice, for so the student called it—the tall man who stood with the others near the Rajah’s seat at Mercara when Runga and I passed through.”

“ I know not of what you talk, my son,” said Kuppuswamy gently, fearing to drop the first seed of discontent on a soil that seemed so fertile.

“ Runga knew,” said the boy sullenly, “ but it was past his speech to make it clear to me. At least, he showed me——” The boy hesitated.

“ He showed you——” the vakil prompted.

“ I will tell you, Kuppuswamy,” said the boy, voluntarily settling at his feet and fixing his eyes upon him. “ You remember the fort of Kotay, that lies to the south of Mercara as you cross the town with the river on the left—the fort that the ancient Rajahs built for battle and the white sahibs and their memsahibs use for their games with

the ball? We stood near the outer wall, Runga and I, watching the white ball fly as the bat flies at twilight, and listening to the memsahibs swear in our Hindustani at the weary ball *wāla*. Soon a ball came over the fortress wall, and rolled to the spot where we were standing. I picked it up as it lay at my feet, and, thinking to amuse the sahib who sprang over the wall in pursuit, I held it in my open palm before his very eyes. As he put out his hand to take it, lo! it vanished! It was a trick that Runga taught me, but the sahib did not laugh as the villagers had done. 'Black spawn of the devil!' he called out, and felled me with a blow. When good Runga came to my assistance, the sahib raised his voice in alarm, and many of his friends rushed upon us, with their dogs and their whips. What had I done? I returned their ball even before the sahib had recovered from his surprise at its disappearance. The trick was well done. Runga said as much, but 'racial prejudice' spoilt it. So said Runga. Had I been white of skin, he said, the sahib would have called his memsahibs round me and praised me for my skill."

"It was but a small matter, my son," said Kuppuswamy, smiling at the boy's

indignation. "Perhaps the sahib feared you meant to steal the ball and interfere with their game. Remember, it was his ball."

"But whose fort is it?" the boy demanded fiercely. "Tell me that!"

"Pish! child, you are as impetuous as a woman of thirty. It is not for you nor me to think of these things and in this manner. What the gods have willed man cannot set aside in mere caprice. It is not for you nor me to question the rights by which we are the ruled and not the rulers; we must submerge our cherished ideals and learn to obey."

He rose and left the boy to ponder over the problem. That very night, as Kuppuswamy sat alone in the apartment which answered the purposes of a study, a faint knock at the door aroused him from the dreams into which he had lapsed. The hour was late and there was suspicion in the voice that inquired the name of the intruder.

"It is I—Krishna!" was the reply; and with an exclamation of surprise the philosopher threw wide the door. The boy, clad only in his night attire, was standing on the threshold!

But it was not the Krishna of two or three hours before. The black hair was dishevelled and hung about the face as the dank seaweed hangs to the face of the ocean's dead. And the face ! The brown skin had assumed a lighter and a ghastly appearance ; at the corners of the eyes it was actually shrivelled. The cheeks were sunken and the lower lip overlapped the upper. The veins of the long, slender neck stood out like knotted strings. The eyes of the boy terrified the man. Wide and staring, they held him spellbound with the intenseness of their scrutiny. Standing there, with the darkness of the room without for a background, the yellow light of the study lamp playing upon his twitching, unnatural face, and his white linen night robes thrown loosely round him, the boy seemed like some prematurely old man newly risen from the tomb.

“ Krishna ! ” the man gasped. “ What ails thee, child ? ”

The boy moved slowly forward, then clutched him by the hand. For a moment he stood, dazed and seemingly weakened by the mental agony which obviously he had suffered. Kuppuswamy passed his hand over the boy's forehead, and uttered a cry

of horror as he quickly withdrew it, cold and wet and clammy.

“ What has happened, boy ? ”

The sound of the agitated voice awakened the boy, and, shivering slightly, he released Kuppuswamy's hand, only to wind his long arms about the startled man's neck.

“ Kuppuswamy ”—the voice was low and quavering—“ I offended you to-night ; I ask your pardon.”

“ Pish, child ! I did not think of it in that light. But what has that to do with—with this ? ” and he held the boy at arm's length, the better to survey him.

“ This ? ” Krishna smiled feebly. “ 'Tis nothing, my father. Only once before they—I—— Ugh, how cold it is ! ”

The man hurriedly threw a blanket round him and, compelling him to sit at his feet, plied him with questions. But the boy only shook his head, as though his mind were incapable of piecing together the heterogeneous fragments of the horror that appeared to have visited him.

“ Tell me, Kuppuswamy,” he cried suddenly and appealingly, “ tell me more of what we spoke of this evening—of India, her people, her slaves, her rise, her fall, and

the Mutiny, the bloody Mutiny. Ah! tell me of that, Kuppuswamy—tell me of those who have risen in arms against the tyranny of the invaders.”

“ I know not, child. You are mad ! ”

“ You lie ! ”

The boy had sprung to his feet, and his willowy fingers entwined themselves in the beard of the man before him. “ You lie ! ” he shrieked. “ You know of these things, but your heart is white and craven, and you fear the lash of the white sahibs.”

“ Krishna ! ” The man tore the boy from him, and held him forcibly in a chair until the fit had passed. Then, when the scalding tears of repentance poured in a stream down the child’s face, the vakil took him in his arms, as he might have taken a new-born babe, and wept.

“ Yes, yes, I pardon thee, Krishna,” he said, as the boy sobbed in his arms. “ Thou art a strange child. But the gods are wise. If it is that thy mind runs on these things, all else being obliterated, depend upon it a path has been chosen for thee, and it is not for me to discourage thee by frown or speech.”

“ But, Kuppuswamy, help me not to think as I do ; let me live as others. I am a boy,

yet I bear the burden of a man. My mind cries out for food that is beyond me. Give it me, satisfy me, and let me rest ! ”

“ What can I tell thee, child ? My own mind is chaotic with this sudden eruption.”

“ Kuppuswamy ”—the word was spoken in an awesome whisper, and the boy glanced fearfully round the room before he continued —“ have you ever heard of the Dead Seven ? ”

A sudden wave of understanding mingled with indignation swept over the man.

“ I see it now,” he mused. “ Tell me, child, who has dared to disturb the peace of thy youth by the recital of a tale that is almost a legend.”

“ No one, Kuppuswamy. But tell me the tale or legend. I want to hear it. I—I must hear it.”

“ What a child it is ! ” the old man sighed. “ Well, if it will serve to pacify, I will tell all I know of the story. I said it was a legend, but if my memory be not at fault, the inception of the Society of Reformers dates back only to those ten years which immediately followed the great Mutiny. The administration of the country then was very much the same as it is to-day. The Indian Empire belongs to

Britain, and Britain, boy, stands to-day as the greatest colonizer the world has ever known. The methods by which they subjugated the Indians and now control them have ever seemed passing strange to the native student. In the name of civilization they sent us men to teach us modern ideas. They brought with them all the vices of the West, and few of its virtues. From the very first they bred distrust and hatred. Once upon a time this country was rich in natural stores. They taught us how to sow and reap. There their teaching ended. 'India for the Britons' was the principle on which they civilized us. They sent us taskmasters, men who rode roughshod over the natives with firearms in their belts and dog-whips in their hands. Floggings for alleged sedition were daily occurrences. In every possible way they showed us that we were the conquered, they the conquerors. There was no respect for the vanquished, no trace of sympathy between the men who came to rule and the men who had been compelled to surrender their country.

"We had toiled like men before in order that our wives and children might have bread, but we toiled like slaves under the

rulers. Taxes were levied and collected before the grain was garnered. Against this particular form of cruelty the ryots raised their voices in bitterness, and through the intervention of the Great White Mother the form of taxation was altered. The zamindar system was introduced, and while it relieved the conscience of the Government, it meant a new lash for the natives. Under this system the land was cut and apportioned to those lucre ghouls which are to be found in every country. They gladly paid a fixed rental to the Government, knowing full well that they could exact what they pleased from the ryots. Evictions were daily occurrences in every village, but what could the ryots do when behind the zamindar was an incombatable power ?

“ Oh yes, they taught us the meaning of litigation, but only a few misguided people appealed to it, for the procedure was a travesty of justice. They drafted a legal code for the protection of all inhabitants of the country. I have known a white official to be tried for the murder of his native boy, whom he had shot because the lad stole one of his cigars. The trial lasted three weeks, because the judge who heard it was out

shooting most of the time—ay, and shooting over the estates of the man who was on trial for his life.

“It was in these circumstances that the Society of Reformers was formed. It was constituted of seven of the most intellectual and best-read men in the country, and by means of pamphlet and oratory they appealed to the masses to stand firm in their demands of the British Government. They aimed at a thorough political emancipation, although they would have been better advised to strike only for self-government on the lines adopted in other countries of the Empire. They asked for a reduction of the military expenditure, and of the pensions and salaries of the civil officials who were spread like locusts over the land. ‘Help us to develop our own country,’ they cried, ‘by taxing the foreign competitor and making use of our raw materials; help us to irrigate the land and avert the famines which rob us of those we love.’

“But a deaf ear was turned to these entreaties, and four of the seven paid for their audacity with their lives. I cannot tell you how they died, but I fear that Justice, the many-faced jade, demanded their lives

on the ground of sedition. The remaining three pursued their crusade, but while they could count on many adherents, the lack of funds stifled their efforts completely.

“ Then one day a fakir from Burma reached the province of Coorg, and unearthed the whereabouts of the three agitators. To them he told a wonderful tale of a visitation that he had experienced. They paid him that respect which all Indians pay those who are in touch with the occult. The more enlightened European terms it superstition yet in the same breath he prates of the genius of a poet who wrote that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in our philosophy. Because his mind is untutored in the ways of the East the Western scientist laughs our mysticism to scorn. Children and fools laugh at that which they cannot understand.

“ The fakir told the three that their labours were in vain, and that the ends they aimed at would never be achieved by their endeavours alone. ‘ But,’ he said, ‘ it is written in the book of the gods that one shall rise up from the people of the nation and free ye from the yoke of the oppressors. He is not known to ye, but from the grave ye will follow his

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steps one by one, counsel him with your wisdom, warn him of impending danger. In his hands lies the destiny of the nation, but other hands across the seas will bring him strength that ye dream not of.' "

" Is that all, Kuppuswamy? " asked the listening boy, as the old man paused in his narrative.

" Not quite, child, although of the remainder I have but an imperfect knowledge. It is said that some time after the visit of the fakir, who, by the way, disappeared as mysteriously as he came, one of the three received from an unknown source a waist-belt of tiger-skin, dyed the colour of blood. Sewn up inside the belt were three letters pricked in palm-leaves. One that was wholly intelligible to the Reformers warned them to guard the secrets of the belt with their lives, for they meant the emancipation of the race. They were to study the cipher in which the messages were pricked, and if they were then unable to solve it they must await the coming of the Chosen. The seven are now dead, and no one knows what became of their secret. If the story be not a mere legend, it is probable that after the death of the seventh the undeciphered messages fell into the hands of

a creditor, who, judging them on their face-value, destroyed them. One, it is believed, held the key to unlimited wealth, which could be used in the great work of uplifting India ; the other being a scheme by which the work could be successfully carried out.

“ That is the end of the story, child, but—why, come, what is this ? ”

The boy's head had fallen forward against the philosopher's knee, and he was trembling as though seized with the first symptoms of the plague. Kuppuswamy picked him up in his arms and carried him to his room.

CHAPTER III

A BUNGALOW—AND A SCANDAL

MAN'S inhumanity to woman cannot be more aptly illustrated than in the case of a faithful and trusting wife who allows herself to be dragged across the ocean and dropped into a hill bungalow under an enervating Indian sun. If she goes there doubting in her heart that the East holds compensations for what she must perforce leave behind her in the West, but bravely determined to make the best of things, she may worry through for a couple of years without any great inconvenience.

She will find that at least one gratifying feature of the life is that of being a more important personage in her bungalow than she was in her flat in Kensington. It will please her vanity, if she be of that temperament, to find that her social status can undergo a wonderful metamorphosis even in a single night. "Seasons" do not count in India. Her husband, even though he holds only a minor magistracy, will assume a new dignity of which she had not thought him capable in the old days. Invitations to various functions, where a Colonel or a couple of Majors are thrown in free gratis,

will speedily obliterate the memory of tradesmen's "hops," or quiet little dinners *à deux* in Rupert or Wardour Street. She will smile complacently, even admiringly, at the man who has effected all this as she drives with him into the city in their yellow-wheeled chaise; and when she returns in the heat of the day to doze on the veranda, with an iced flip at her elbow and the punkah moving lazily over her head, she will, perhaps, chide herself for having entertained thoughts of distrust when she left Tilbury.

And then the disillusionment period begins. Her social grandeur takes on another and a more insignificant hue. She realizes that in her first calculations of the conditions she made no allowance for the change of environment. She begins to understand why a house-fly in Kensington is a butterfly in Madras. Then comes the period of depression. The deadly monotony of the routine makes her "nervy," and she hankers after novelties as a child after candies. Anything, anything, will do, if it will bring only momentary relief from the hideous sameness of things.

Mrs. James Slaney-Dennis (it used to be plain "J. S. Dennis" in the old days) had

been in Madras five years. Naturally, she had long passed the satisfied stage, had sunk deep in the depression, and was now standing on the threshold of desperation. To be truthful, she was lying on it when Mr. James Slaney-D., ex-devil to a Temple barrister and now a full- and fly-blown magistrate, sauntered up and placed before her a new novelty for her jaded palate.

“ Bit risky, isn’t it ? ” She had lifted her freckled eyelids, and was looking at him in mild astonishment from the cushioned rattan chair.

“ Trifle,” he agreed, throwing a banana with great precision at the weary punkah-wāla. “ There’s only Major Skew that’s likely to kick ; but Graham was fearfully in earnest, otherwise I shouldn’t have entertained the idea for a moment. One must keep up appearances.”

“ Graham is fearfully in earnest about most things—for a time,” she replied. “ Just kick that wāla again, Jimmy, dear. You pay that little beast too much ; he’s getting fat and lazy.”

“ One rupee a month, my dear. Electricity’s dearer, and you don’t get your fair share of blow out of the punkah.”

“That’s it. Go on! Why don’t you ask me to get up an’ fan him? You should have been a missionary, James; your heart’s too soft.”

He sighed despairingly and rearranged her cushions. “This damned heat would make anything soft,” he growled, then smiled at his own facetiousness.

“Then why don’t we get out of it?” she demanded, raising herself from a recumbent position and punching the pillow vigorously.

“So we shall, my dear, when Graham’s ready for Edinburgh. But get back to the starting-point. He wants to invite this friend of his. Although I can’t see that a native student will spoil a garden-party, you never know how the others may take it.”

“Who is he, anyway?”

“Graham calls him a wonder, a genius—but you know Graham’s talk. Says he walked through his exams. like a stoat through a fowl-house, and turned the college masters green with envy by his essays on political economy.”

“Has that anything to do with domestic economy, Jimmy?” She looked at him

seriously. "He might give me a hint on the treatment of his nigger friends that you pay your good money to. I'd like to bludgeon that cook."

He smiled wearily. "Here's Graham himself," he said thankfully. "You can talk it over with him, Elsie," and he turned on his heel and went into the house.

Graham Dennis was a young man of twenty, well-built, fair-haired, and as freckled as his mother. Before entering Merchants' Universal College, two years earlier, he had gone the pace with the rest of the white youngsters in the neighbourhood who had the misfortune to be sons of hard-working and doting parents. His complexion showed signs of a little wildness, but "climate" is always an excuse to be considered. His studies at college, however, had earned the commendation of his masters, and there was some justification for the hopes of his parents that Graham Dennis, M.D., would yet be a credit to the family. He came on to the veranda with a cheery "Hot, mater?" and, at her quick command to kick the punkah-wāla soundly, promptly obeyed before settling himself in a chair by her side. The punkah-wāla seemed to be distinctly fortunate in

this: the Dennis family consisted of only three persons.

"Pater mentioned it, eh?" He reached over and drank what remained of her iced flip.

She turned to him with a bored expression on her face. "Said something about a medical student you wished to invite to the garden-party on Thursday—a nig——"

"A gentleman, mater—really a gentleman."

"He'll be a novelty, anyway."

He ignored the jest. "Honestly, mater, he's the most remarkable fellow I ever struck out here, and you know I'm not keen on coloured goods. He may be a native, but you mark my words: he'll make some of our fellows hustle when he gets to Edinburgh."

"A swatter, Grahamy boy? Not your style."

"He's not a swatter, and he is my style. He's the style of most of the fellows at college. They gave him the usual spike at first—thought him one of your obsequious, book-grubbing wālas. But if you'd seen him tackle them at their own game, you'd have shrieked 'bully' for him. Big, tall, fine

chap, with a face like a baby's when he's out for a game, and a face that's a hundred years old when he's got a fit of swat on him. He put an unholy fear into Grubb in the lecture-room first week he came. You remember Grubb—shipping people—the big fellow with the bulbous nose ? ”

She shook her head and smiled at his description.

“ Not Grubb—the fellow who broke the ‘ cham.’ bottle on the punkah-wāla's head the day he came to tiffin ? ”

A broad smile of happy recollection.

“ Well, Grubb heaved a fourth rib at him in a fit of temper, and—well, he heaved Grubb into the corner of the room as though he were a rotten melon. When the mighty Grubb came to I thought there was going to be another job for the pater—one of those ‘ unfortunate accident ’ jobs, you know. But before he got half-way across the room, with venom in his eye and sulphur on his tongue, he stopped dead. His face was as white as my cummerbund, and he shrank back in the corner like a whipped pup, crying out that the fellow's eyes were burning holes in him.”

“ And were they ? ” She asked the question

listlessly, and he leaned over and pinched her cheek.

“It was funk, sheer funk, that’s all, and he’s kept clear of Krishna since.”

“Krishna! Nice name. Wonder what Major Skew will think of it?”

“The noble Skew can think what he pleases. One of these days he’ll be getting in the way of a bullet. He’s awfully reckless at a rabbit-drive. He may be glad of the services of Krishna, for what that fellow doesn’t know of punctures and plasters Edinburgh won’t teach him.”

She smiled at his ardour. “And, then, there’s——” she commenced, glancing sharply at him.

He caught the meaning of the glance and turned away confusedly.

“Mademoiselle Charlotte Bressane, the charming young mystery of Agra Nook, who dropped from the rigging of a coaster one fine morn, and speedily became the coveted of every Anglo-Indian——”

“Graham!”

“Ail right, I won’t give them a name. But seriously, mater, I don’t think you can reasonably claim to be the guardian and protector of the lady’s feelings, however

sensitive they may be on racial humbug. I call Krishna 'friend,' and a tried friend. You are my mother, and——"

There was a real maternal tenderness in the way in which she placed her hand on his and allowed her eyes to rest on his expansive, perspiring, open face.

"Personally," he went on, in a somewhat aggrieved tone of voice, "personally, I think that Miss Bressane will receive Krishna as an equal. She is not a racial fanatic, and he has a wonderful way of compelling your respect, and"—his voice was strangely modulated—"and she is a lady, and a very charming lady."

The woman on the chair turned an inquiring look upon him, but the gravity of his countenance was only transient. He avoided her glance, and occupied himself in selecting a large and particularly soft banana, with which to pelt the punkah-wāla.

"Attractive," said Mrs. Dennis laconically.

"Handsome," he qualified.

"Accomplished, and—and——"

He turned quickly at the pause.

"And——" he prompted.

"The Platonic friend of His Unimpeachable Majesty, Major Skew."

He laughed loudly. "Mater, mater," he cried, "you should have been the magistrate, and given the poor old pater the job of holding garden-parties and smiling impartially on everybody, whether they deserved it or not."

"Ah, well, let it go at that," she muttered sleepily, making herself more comfortable in the chair and closing her eyes. "Invite your friend, and let's have a look at the wonder. Feel interested—slightly. Anything for a change. Whew-w! What a hole of a country! Grahamy boy, promise that you'll never let me die here. Oh for one half-hour of London!"

"Poor old mater!" He rose and crossed the veranda.

"Suppose it'll be all right?" she called out dreamily. "Hope Miss Bressane won't be huffed. She's awfully prejudiced. So's the Major, and—we—can't—afford——"

He laughed back at her and went down the steps.

"Hope she won't be too interested, that's all," he threw back. "The Major is awfully prejudiced. Any letters for post, mater?"

"No, dear. Don't worry. Haven't had a wink all day."

"Sorry. By-by!"

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“ Say, Grahamy boy ! ”

“ Yes ! ” He was half-way down the garden.

“ Just kick the punkah-wāla before you go, there’s a dear.”

CHAPTER IV

A DREAM IN MUSIC

THE Slaney-Dennis garden-party was always a gilt-edged attraction. Although in nowise approaching the voluptuous extravagance of many other similar functions in the Province, the Number One Europeans of Madras never failed to mark the Hill engagement "important" in their diaries, and usually arrived in numbers that were the despair of more distinguished hostesses. Men and women were drawn there by the same irresistible something that leads the stock-and-share princes of Throgmorton Street to pass luxuriously embellished restaurants and lunch in murky little dens in the neighbourhood of the Bank of England. Mrs. Dennis's success as a hostess was due mainly to one magnetic quality: she had a sharp and biting tongue, and scandal, meat and drink to your effete Anglo-Indian, rolled off the tip of that tongue like jets of flame leaping from the muzzle of a Maxim. Scandal would fill a church, when truth and modesty would empty a theatre.

Men and women whose chief mission in life was the dangerous one of killing time and reputations gathered at the feet of Mrs.

Dennis. Theirs were the mixed feelings of delight and doubt that school-children experience when compelled to witness the spanking of a misdemeanant.

This particular garden-party was expected to be no less a success than its predecessors. It proved a milestone in the lives of one or two of the guests.

Mrs. Slaney-Dennis had a pretty taste in illumination schemes, and the tiny multi-coloured glow-lamps, cunningly hung in palm and mango, enhanced the romance even of a tropical garden. The guests moved in and out of the arbours with characteristic languor. The talk was generally "small"—the hostess's preliminary duties were not yet accomplished. Like most of the ladies present, she was dressed in white pongee silk, but in startling defiance of complexion "tones," a scarlet rose was dropped with seeming carelessness amid her auburn hair.

In a secluded corner of the garden Mr. Slaney-Dennis, painfully resplendent in tussore silk with sovereign buttons, puffed laboriously at a black cheroot, and "thought things." It was somewhat late in the evening when his ruminations were disturbed by the irrepressible Graham, who forced his way

through the crowd of guests. He was followed by one whose advent in the garden checked the buzz of conversation, and spread astonishment over the countenances of the majority.

“Allow me, pater. Krishna, my respected father ; father, my friend Krishna, the foster-son of Kuppuswamy, the vakil, well known to you, I believe.”

Mr. Dennis found himself rising slowly from his seat and holding out the hand of welcome to a tall, dignified young Indian student. In the subdued light of an overhanging rose-lantern the dark face in repose reminded the magistrate of Irving's Hamlet. And he felt instinctively that behind the grave eyes, whose gaze was resting on him, there burned the fire of an almost supernatural ambition.

“Graham has made your name quite familiar to us,” said the magistrate, with just a shade of condescension in his voice.

A soft, pleasant laugh broke from between the thin lips. “The friendship of your son has been one of the pleasures of my term at college. The kindness of his parents will, I trust, be a memory that I shall always treasure.”

Then Graham took him by the arm and led him in search of the "mater," Dennis senior following with his eyes the willowy figure in grey, until it was lost in the maze of guests.

Mrs. Dennis's freckled and perspiring face was clouded with disappointment when the two reached her side. A native prodigy who had promised to play the harp at her garden-party had failed to put in an appearance. Probably a friendly neighbour had discovered the man's price and bid two rupees more. The musical programme was in danger of being dubbed "minor" by the spiteful local European journals.

"What can I do?" she was saying to a sympathetic friend. "What can anyone do if they've got these beastly niggers to depend on for anything? I should——" She stopped short when she caught sight of the stranger standing behind her son, flushed uncomfortably, and turned an appealing look on Graham, who came to her rescue in his usual free and open manner.

"Shouldn't let trifles help the heat in its work," he said laughingly. "This is my friend Krishna, of whom I spoke the other day. Perhaps he can help you out of the

mess. What do you say, Krish? The mater's short of a one-man opera."

The remark was made playfully. If it served the purpose of smoothing over his mother's unfortunate slip, Graham would be satisfied.

"I deeply sympathize with you, madam." Krishna had stepped forward, and she flinched before the scrutiny of his piercing eyes. "Can not you find a substitute?"

"Impossible!" She tried to avoid his gaze and addressed herself to Graham. "There's only Miss Bressane among the whole of the crowd who has anything of a voice, and the Major yonder seems to hold the copyright."

"Let the beggars amuse themselves," suggested the practical Graham, a remark which served only to increase the ill-temper of the hostess.

"Will you allow me, madam, to offer my humble services? I'm rather fond of amusing myself with the violin when medicine palls."

"Bravo, Krishna! I told you, mater, he's a regular handy man. Send for the guv'nor's old fiddle. I'll warrant Krish 'll knock a tune out of it."

The violin was produced—one of those

cheap imitations of a "Strad," that play havoc with a neighbour's nerves. Krishna took it gravely, ran his thumb across the strings, and stepping across to the piano, struck a chord. With conventional indifference the guests continued their chatter after glancing at the tall, dark stranger who stood tuning the instrument that never before had known the sound of melody. He walked to the edge of the veranda, and threw a rapid glance at his audience, as though to determine in his own mind the extent of their critical faculties before he commenced to play; then he raised the violin to his chin.

The ruby glow-lamps above his head tinged his dark cheeks and made them shine like bronze. A slight breeze, fragrant with the smell of wild herbs of the hill-side, sprang up and tossed his long hair over his massive forehead, until it seemed to form a protective network of black bushes, through which gleamed two bright, soulful eyes. About the corners of the thin, cruel lips a smile of bitter contempt came and went, and came again.

He drew the bow softly across the strings, and a low, wailing note, almost like a human

cry, stilled every tongue and turned a hundred eyes upon the player. It was a dream of an old world, a soft, heart-reaching andante—a prayer to their gods by a people forsaken ; a dream into which the player wove his listeners until visions floated through the night-wrapped foliage, staring with piteous eyes—haunting, ghostly, terrifying !

Who was this ? From whence had he sprung ? They pressed forward in open-mouthed wonder. Then, petrified, they stood there, their eyes fixed on yon swaying, emotional, unnatural being—a study in grey and bronze, in jealousy, rage, vindictiveness, passion, and wild, insatiable ambition. They could not break the spell to inquire of each other his name ; they could not throw off the fascination that sealed their tongues. They forgot everything, forgot themselves, lived only for That. They saw nothing, looked for nothing—only That !

It drew the breath out of their throats as the wind draws the heat of a forest fire. Their breasts heaved and fell with the motions of that thin, white-haired, flexible bow that fastened on the strings with the fierce delight of a vulture on its prey ; their hearts were bleeding for someone who was writhing in

fearful agony amid the devouring flames of hell ; their throats were dry as the sands of a desert, yet their brows were wet and clammy, and the air was humid and dank as the slimy walls of a Bastille. Then the night drew back her mantle, and in the golden dawn of a new day they saw a new earth, peopled with new beings, who gave them looks in which pity and reproach were commingled, and then withdrew again into the opaque mists of nothingness. It was a dream—a strange, wild dream—and they crept closer together, these men and women of the West, whose white skins were a legacy of the gods. The women's white hands went feeling out in the darkness for the arms of the men, but still all eyes were on That.

And then, when their hearts were nigh on bursting with the unexpected strain, and their finger-nails cut into the burning, itching palms, he laughed. God ! how he laughed, this painter in music !—ay, and laughed at them and their white faces !

The music ceased. He had placed the violin on the piano, and was walking quietly down the steps. There was an awful silence—a straining, nerve-wrenching silence. One

little woman in a gown of pure white silk crept up to him and touched his coat as he passed. There was terror in her eyes.

And then the blood came back into the veins of the crowd, and it shouted and laughed—and wept.

CHAPTER V

A DANGEROUS PASSION

“ **B**Y Jove ! you’re a wonder, Krish ! ”
The delighted Graham was holding his friend at arm’s length and gazing at him admiringly.

“ Did you see the pater ? The poor old boy was howling like a kid. First time I’ve seen him blub. Heavens, man, you’re a marvel ! and not a soul knew that you had it in you. Where the deuce did you pick it up, eh ? Man alive ! if you liked to chuck bone-mending and drug-faking you could make a fortune with that musical talent.”

Krishna waved his hand deprecatingly. “ But I don’t want to make a fortune ! ” he expostulated. “ Besides, it was nothing—merely a little fantasy ; but I wanted to play it, and I wanted them to feel it as I felt it. I suppose that made all the difference.”

“ It was grand ! ” said Graham ecstatically. “ You’ll have all the old dowagers of the place at your heels. They’re awfully keen on that sort of thing.”

“ I’m afraid that I shall disappoint them, then ” ; and that quiet smile of contempt that Graham had so often noticed twisted the corners of the dark mouth. The two had

withdrawn from the crowd of guests, but not out of earshot of the excited questioning and conjecturing that was going on. Mrs. Dennis was being playfully reproached on all sides for her secretiveness, and, with her customary diplomacy, she was only feebly protesting that the genius of the evening did not owe his "discovery" to her.

"And pray, Mr. Dennis junior, what have I done to merit your displeasure?"

The two men turned sharply at the words, and Graham, blushing like a schoolgirl, stepped forward to greet a dark, handsome woman, who, accompanied by a military officer a few years her senior, had stolen quietly on them in the semi-darkness.

"I assure you, Miss Bressane, I had no idea that——"

"Ideas owe much to inclination," she laughed. "Had it not been for the sleuth-like instinct of Major Skew, I might not have had the opportunity to-night of asking you to introduce me to your friend."

She held out her hand, and Krishna took it gravely in his for the fraction of a second. She seemed disappointed that he did not display unwonted delight at what even some Europeans of his age would have regarded

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as a great condescension on her part. The smile of self-confidence left her countenance, and with sudden coldness she drew back a step.

"This is Major Skew," she said quietly, "a friend of mine."

The Major coughed, frowned, and fixed his single eyeglass with unconscionable care.

"Really, Miss Bressane—er—you don't expect me to—er——" He drew back.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance." Krishna was holding out his hand. His eyes were flashing a challenge. There was a ring in his voice that made the Major wince and realize in an instant that if there was going to be any condescension it would not be on his part. "Shake hands, sir!" The Major started back as though he had been struck. His first impulse was to "damn the impertinence of the nigger"; then he became conscious of two specks of fire that were glaring at and burning into him. He lifted his right arm—long afterwards he remembered how flaccid and lifeless it seemed—and touched the long, brown, willowy fingers that were extended. It was Miss Bressane who brought welcome relief.

"You created quite a sensation to-night

with your wonderful performance on the violin," she said softly, almost shyly, turning her eyes on Krishna, who was still smiling at the Major's obvious discomfiture. "For myself, I shall never be able to repay you for—I was going to say the pleasure, but one could hardly call it that. It was pleasure and pain blended, but without the pain there would have been no pleasure."

"You are too generous," he said, allowing his gaze to rest on her, to her embarrassment. Her cheeks burned and her breath came in painful half-jerks. There was nothing insolent in the stare that seemed to be analysing her very soul, only something magnetic—something that she had not found in other men.

"You must have studied under a good master?" she suggested.

"I have never had a master," he replied, without the slightest trace of conceit.

She smiled incredulously, but it did not provoke the resentment that Graham expected.

"Music, like the sister-arts," he said gravely, "is not a question of masters, but of inspiration. The masters merely tend the seeds, as it were, and frequently kill them by experiments."

"You are a cynic, Mr. Krishna."

“No, only a medical student, and accustomed, naturally, to dissect.”

The choleric Major Skew guffawed so loudly at the sally that his pock-marked face assumed the colour of boiled beef.

“Ha, ha!” he roared; “not bad, not half bad, for—for a”—(the humiliating incident of a few minutes before recurred to his mind) “not half bad for a——” and the sneer on his face completed the sentence.

“Major!” Miss Bressane’s eyes were flashing with indignation. “If you are a gentleman, you will apologise to Mr. Krishna for your intentional rudeness.”

The Major’s forced laugh stuck in his throat as she turned upon him in a fury.

“Apologise, or be good enough to leave me.”

“My dear Miss Bressane,” he began; but she stamped her foot impatiently. His red face took on a darker tinge, and he played nervously with his bristling moustache.

“There is no need to apologize,” said Krishna, addressing himself to Miss Bressane, his eyes expressing his gratitude for her championship. “An apology at the best of times is only a lie told at the expense of one’s feelings. The Major’s might be too

obvious. There must be tact in the telling even of a lie."

"Egad, sir!" The Major moved forward threateningly, with stick upraised.

"Yes, I do not doubt it," said Krishna calmly. "You are going to say that you've kicked many a native to death for half my sins—eh? You are boastful as well as rude, sir."

"Krishna!" cried Graham, now thoroughly alarmed. "For Heaven's sake, don't, Major. Let the matter drop. I'm sure you didn't mean to insinuate anything by your remark."

"No doubt," said the Major icily, turning away, "your father will explain this unwarrantable imposition on his guests."

Krishna laughed contemptuously. "And no doubt," he called out, "the day will come when you will find yourself without the protection of your uniform—and a lady. We will then resume this conversation."

But the Major was striding away toward the house. "It won't do to let him go like that," said Graham, in a tone of annoyance, and he hurried after the retreating figure, leaving the other two standing alone beneath the trees.

She was the first to speak. "I am so sorry," she began, but he checked her with a quiet little laugh that was half a cry.

"No, no," he said; "it was my fault. I'm so sensitive."

"I know you are." She raised her head and looked at him wonderingly, pityingly. The moon sat high in the heavens, like a silver god on a sapphire throne, and its white light filtered through the fronds of the palms and bathed her face. And for the first time her beauty appealed to him—he who before had no eyes for women. The face was oval and the chin small. The determination and resoluteness of the mouth were discounted by the tenderness and yearning of the eyes. Yet he remembered how the fire had leaped into their calm depths only a moment before. As she stood there—so near to him that the crisp lace of her simple white skirt brushed his knees at the will of a passing breeze—an emotion that was wholly new to him surged through his veins in an irrepressible wave. His eyes wandered from her face. The perfect symmetry of the body pleased his artist's eye. The poise of the head, the throw of the shoulders, the graceful, delicate curve of the bosom—he marked them all. And

then the vision of the choleric Major looked at him through the trees. He felt cold of a sudden.

"You know that I am sensitive," he said, with feigned surprise. "How can that be? I have never seen you until now."

"No," she replied in a voice that was almost a whisper, "but you told me to-night—the veranda, the violin. Do you know that I went a long way with you in that dream of yours, and then——"

"Then?"

"Then you frightened me. Yes, I confess it. And yet I have been told that my nerves were made for a soldier and given me in mistake."

He laughed amusedly. "Perhaps you were a little overstrung to-night. I should be grieved to think that I——"

"Oh no; it was glorious, heavenly!" she went on. "I should love to hear it again. No, I don't mean that, but something else, something less cruel, less suggestive."

"It would be a pleasure to me," he said; and in the moonlight she thought that his eyes glowed.

"You will?" she cried. "Oh, thank you

so much ! I shall look forward to it with an eagerness that even you cannot understand."

"Perhaps," he ventured, "Graham will ——" He paused and waited for her to help him out of an obvious difficulty.

"I will ask him to bring you over to my bungalow," she said. "You've heard of it ? Agra Nook ? No ? I thought that every European tongue in the province had advertised it for me."

"You do not fear their tongues, Miss Bressane ?"

"Why should I ? There are sufficient skeletons in Madras cupboards to start a good-sized cemetery—of reputations"

"You live alone ?" The abruptness of the question amused her ; the unmistakable solicitude of the questioner made her laugh outright.

"And pray, Mr. Serious, why should a Frenchwoman fear to live alone with her servants ? There is nothing in the Constitution which prohibits it as being indiscreet—or worse ?" Her big eyes twinkled mischievously at his discomfiture.

"I was thinking of your solitude," he said apologetically.

"I have my music, my studies, my work in life."

She stopped suddenly, as though fearing that she had gone too far, and watched the effect of her words.

"Your work?"

"Yes, my work. Come, do not falsify my first impression of you."

"That——"

"That you had risen above your environment, broadened your mind by study and observation, and cast off the shackles of foolish old customs and beliefs, one of which makes for the disparagement of women generally. I hold that everyone, man and woman, should have a mission in life, whether it be open or secret."

"I suppose you are right," he said. She thought she detected suspicion in the rapid glance which he gave her, so she changed the subject.

"Then you promise to come and play for me?"

"I promise," he said gravely, "if——"

"If Graham will chaperon you, eh?" She was laughing in his face, but he never moved a muscle.

"It were better that he came," he said

modestly. "There are so many things to consider."

"For instance?"

"There is such a feeling among Europeans as racial prejudice." His lips closed together with a snap, and she noted that his hands were clenched.

"Ah, you are sensitive—hypersensitive. No one with a mission in life should encourage that feeling."

"Not when it is provoked daily, hourly?" he demanded bitterly.

She shook her head. "If I had been as sensitive as you when I first came to this country, I should have left, humiliated, within a month after my arrival. But I had my work. I could not afford to turn myself into a highly sensitized photographic film."

"Still," he protested, "I should not like to add to your embarrassment."

"Come," she said, laughing lightly, "to convince you of my racial scruples, I will make a demand on your gallantry, and ask you to escort me back to the hostess. The hour is late. I must make my adieux."

She took his arm, and together they walked back to the lawn.

It would have been difficult to describe his

feelings. Though the freedom of her speech had been startling and her treatment of convention daring and risky, he felt satisfied that here was a strong woman—a woman possessing all the attractions of her sex and none of its frailties ; a woman capable of firing with her right hand the passion-grass around her, and beating it out with her left when it became dangerous. His acquaintance with women had been of the slightest, but he knew that this was no ordinary woman. She had said that she had a work, a mission in life, and he began, naturally, to conjecture. He would have asked her boldly, but he was afraid that her answer would dispel the dream-cloud that he was weaving round her. She interested him, and when he strove for a definite reason, he was startled to find that his interest had its inception in admiration.

They had reached the lawn, and already they were surrounded by the other guests. Krishna heard his name mentioned by one or two of the men as he and she mingled with the crowd ; he caught the curious glances of the women-folk ; but he did not mind what they said or thought. His own thoughts were centred on her—the noble head and the swishing, perfumed white silk skirt. He

watched her thread her way to the side of Mrs. Dennis, heard her rippling laughter at some parting jest, watched her wend her way back to his side, and thrilled at the warm grasp of her fingers in a soft "Good night."

And then, when the hum of her car died away in the distance, the blood became heavy and torpid in his veins. He wanted to steal away anywhere—out in the jungle—to think. The lights blinded him; the laughter and jest jarred; the atmosphere weighed down like lead on his brain. He stumbled about the garden, and had many a sarcastic reminder of his colour and breeding hurled in his teeth. But he did not heed them. He was like an imprisoned beast of the forest, and they were so many bars of a cage that kept him in captivity.

At last he met Graham, and with a feeble excuse bade him present his compliments to his parents. Then he hurried away, leaving his friend to ponder over yet another eccentricity.

He stumbled on. Over rice-fields and coffee-plantations, through orange-groves, and across mangrove-swamps. On, on, on! Anywhere, so long as it led to Her! The perspiration rolled in heavy drops from his

forehead. His hands dripped blood after he had forced his way through the undergrowth. His feet were weighted with rice-field mire. But still he kept on. He never stopped to ask himself why he was going or what he would do when he got there. He was merely following that will-o'-the-wisp—a figure in white silk, with massive coils of black hair wound round a defiant head.

And at last he reached Agra Nook—a tiny bungalow hidden in a hollow of the hills. A light was burning in a lower window. It seemed to beckon to and welcome him, and a faint cry of exultation escaped his lips. But he never reached it. Something—he knew not what—kept him back, forced him out of the light of the moon into the shadow of the scrub. And there he waited. It seemed to him that he waited for hours.

He heard a footfall on the gravel path of the garden—a soft, stealthy footfall—a man was making his way, cautiously and furtively, to the bungalow. A low whistle! The door was opened, and in the flood of light that streamed forth he saw her standing on the threshold. The white silk dress had gone. The coils of black hair had been taken down, and the tresses fell about her shoulders in

wavy masses. A pale blue wrapper was thrown carelessly about her limbs, revealing more to his hungry eyes than it concealed. Then the man passed in, and the door was closed again, but not before the lamp-light had flickered for an instant on his face.

It was Major Skew !

The watcher in the scrub leaned against a palm for support. The air was choking him.

She had lied to him—played with him !

The fire died out of his eyes, the sneer of contempt crept back into the corners of his mouth, and he turned again for home.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEAD SEVEN

KUPPUSWAMY'S house had been erected on an eminence beyond and overlooking the native quarter of the city. The moon was paling before the approach of dawn when Krishna, utterly weary in body and mind, reached his own little room. A reading-lamp on the study table still burned, but, the oil being nearly exhausted, the flame spat and spluttered, seemingly in sympathy with the dejected spirits of the man.

He drew a chair to the table and sat with his head resting on his hands, his eyes staring vacantly at the glimmering light. His brain, chaotic and restless, kept sleep at bay. A fly settled on the writing-pad near him, and a green and yellow lizard, blinking its cunning, greedy eyes, crawled in pursuit. Its repulsive body brushed against the man's elbow, but failed to arouse in him the slightest revulsion. Only when a soft tap came to the door did he start nervously from his despondency.

“ Krishna ! ”

He cast a hurried glance at his muddy boots, his soiled clothes, his blood-stained hands ; a hand-mirror on the table before him reflected

a hunted expression on a face that was almost unnatural.

“ Krishna ! ”

He hesitated a moment, then drew aside the sliding panel. Lakshmi stood on the threshold, and as her eyes fell upon him she stepped back in alarm.

“ You, Lakshmi ! ” he exclaimed in a hoarse voice. “ What do you want at—at this hour ? ”

“ I came to seek you, Krishna,” she faltered ; “ but this—this——” And she pointed at his clothes, all wet and torn.

“ It is nothing, Lakshmi,” he said quickly, taking her hand and drawing her into the room. “ It is nothing, I assure you. Do not disturb your father.”

She implied by a gesture that there was no danger from that quarter. The old philosopher slept at the other side of the house.

“ I have been a distance,” Krishna said, in explanation, although his agitation was apparent to her innocent eyes, “ visited a friend, walked home across country.” He sank down in his chair, and she left the room on tiptoe, to return a moment later with warm water and the sweet oil of the coconut, with which she bathed his feet and

hands. He did not attempt to expostulate, but lay back, quiet and impassive, watching the faint glow of the lamp play like a halo round her head.

“Poor Lakshmi!” It was only a half-drawn sigh, but she rose to her feet on the instant and looked into his eyes.

“Why do you say that, Krishna?” she asked. But his answering smile chased away her doubts.

“I was only thinking how unworthy I am of your devotedness.” Her soft hands were pushing back from his brow the straggling wisps, and her touch was the touch of the fawn.

“You are jesting, Krishna,” she whispered; but her sloe-like eyes opened wide, and he saw how near her heart his words had sunk. And when she rose and moved about the room with that fascinating grace of deportment peculiar to the domesticated native of India, he fell to comparing her charms with another. He knew that it had been the wish of his father, and was now the hope of his benefactor, the aged Kuppuswamy, that this girl should one day become his wife. He knew that he loved her—had learned to love her for her sweet simplicity during the years that

he had been in the house of the philosopher. But he realized now, and not without a pang of conscience, that no touch nor glance of hers had ever thrilled him as he had been thrilled that night—thrilled by the touch and glance of one whom he had known only a few hours. Many a time had Lakshmi done as much for him as she was doing now, and he had drawn her to him and whispered that in her ear which made her tremble in his arms like a newly caught bird. There had been occasions, especially of an evening, the young moon climbing above the palm and the deodar silvering the leaves in a soft caress, when, as she ran her cool fingers through his hair, crooning the while a ballad of ancient India, he persuaded himself that she was part of his life—a recompense by the gods for the arduous labours that had devolved upon him. And she, trusting child, had grown to regard him as hers and hers alone, hers to love and serve. To no one had she breathed a word of all she felt, but Kuppuswamy understood and, understanding, rejoiced. To-night the memory of her devotedness came to Krishna and lashed his conscience with the burning sting of whips of fire. A single pressure of milk-white hands was the altar on which he

had been prepared to sacrifice this child. He shrank with shame from her looks of compassion ; he dreaded her caresses, as though her warm, dark arms were bands of steel that would strangle him for his perfidiousness. He wished that she would leave him to wrestle alone with his rebel thoughts, and——

Suddenly she seemed to divine what was passing in his mind. She had brought him his dhoti, and unrolled his mat, and had thrown on the gold and silver brazier a handful of sweet-smelling balsam. He was following her movements with pitying eyes, and once his glance met hers. With a low cry of fear she came again to his chair, and, nestling at his feet, took his hot hands and placed them on her temples. It had been an old habit of hers when, weary of books and study, he had called her to him and told her tales of his dreams and ambitions.

“ Krishna, what ails you ? There is something wrong. Have I displeased you ? ”

“ No, no, Lakshmi,” he hastened ; “ it is nothing—only my head and brain seem heavy and dull.”

Her eyes were fixed upon him, and their solicitude embarrassed him. He closed his, that he might avoid their scrutiny.

“ You are too tired to talk ? ”

“ Yes, Lakshmi—much too tired. I will rest awhile, and in the morning you can give me the message.”

“ Why——”

He smiled at her childlike astonishment.

“ Else why have you broken your rest to come to me ? ” he laughed.

“ Yes, I have a message for you,” she confessed ; “ and it was because the bearer desired me personally to convey it to you that I have stolen from my bed three times to-night.”

“ And it is from—— ? ”

He asked the question carelessly, indifferently. His thoughts were still straying round Agra Nook.

“ From a fakir named Runga.”

“ Runga ! ” He almost leapt from the chair. “ Yes, yes, I know,” he cried when she would have said more. “ Give it to me, Lakshmi.”

“ I thought you were very tired and weary, Krishna,” she said slyly, taking the letter from the folds of her dress.

But he did not answer her. He had torn the letter open, and was eagerly scanning the contents :

"The Dead Seven watch. The Sons strain their ears for the Voice. What news? Three journey from Mercara to hold counsel—two the sons of Rhandi, trusted of thy father, one a stranger from the land Neon. Trust him; his tongue is wise, and the ears of the Sons are wide. 'But trust not man nor woman that thou wouldst not trust with thy life.'

"RUNGA."

"Who brought this message, Lakshmi?"

Krishna's voice was deep and sepulchral, and the girl drew back affrighted.

"Is it ill news, Krishna?" she asked, in a quavering voice. "It were better that I had never seen him."

"No, Lakshmi, not ill news. But tell me, have others seen this?"

"None, Krishna. The fakir bade me guard it as I would guard my lover's heart."

He re-read the letter slowly and deliberately, as though he were committing it word by word to memory; then he held it to the lamp and burned it. She watched with wondering eyes.

"This Runga is a strange man, Lakshmi?" he said, when the letter had shrivelled to a cinder.

The remark was in the form and tone of a question.

"He asked many questions," she said reflectively, "about father and—and about you."

"It was natural that he should speak of me. He knew and befriended me when I was a boy. He did not see Kuppuswamy?"

"Father had gone on a visit to a sick ryot."

There was a long silence. Krishna was staring up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

"Do you trust this Runga, Krishna?" Her face was clouded by sudden graveness.

"Yes," he said quickly, "I told you that he is one of the dearest memories of my childhood. When my father died, he cared for me, fed me, taught me the mysteries of the heavens and the stars, and the birds and beasts of the jungle. Runga is no ordinary man, Lakshmi, and not a charlatan. One scrap of his practical science is worth more than all the libraries of theory cherished by the wise men of the West."

She was thoughtful for a moment, then, "He was anxious to know where you were," she said quietly.

"And you said——?"

She lowered her eyes, and he felt her tremble.

“That you were with my thoughts.” Her voice was almost inaudible, and he had to lean towards her to catch the words.

“And then, Lakshmi?” His agitation troubled her, for she raised her head, and stroked his hands soothingly.

“Then,” she continued, with a look of fear in her big, liquid eyes—“then he drew me to the light and looked long and earnestly into my face.” She shuddered as though the recollection frightened her. “I can see him now. His eyes grew larger and larger, and drew nearer and nearer to mine. Then he disappeared in a great white, fleecy cloud, but his voice was always near me. I seemed to be sinking away in a long, quiet sleep. ‘Tell me what you see,’ he called through the mist. And—and I told him.”

“And what did you see, Lakshmi?” Krishna’s face was drawn, and his breath came in short, thick gasps like that of a man preparing himself for a blow.

“I saw,” she began slowly—“I saw a crowd of sahibs and memsahibs with white faces and quivering lips gazing at someone who was standing near them. The wind had

blown his hair about his face so that I could not distinguish his features, although I could hear Runga's voice urging me to try."

"And then?" Krishna's voice was strangely weak.

"That was all," she said, apparently much relieved. "The scene vanished, and there was the fakir smiling at me as though nothing had happened."

In the silence that followed, Lakshmi could hear the "scrish, scrish" of a lizard as it crawled across the bamboo table. Then Krishna took her face in his hands, and looked sternly into her eyes.

"Lakshmi," he said, "I want you to forget that you received that letter. Let it die now out of your memory."

"Krishna has only to ask," she answered fondly. He lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he seemed surprised to find the girl still at his feet.

"Had Runga aged much, Lakshmi? It is years since we parted."

"Runga—Krishna?"

"Yes, the fakir who brought the letter."

"What letter, Krishna?"

He stooped and kissed her. It was the first time that their lips had met. That single act, a leaf from his book of modernity, lifted her out of the musty relics of custom, and made her a new heaven.

CHAPTER VII

THE PALM-LEAF MESSAGE

WHATEVER the import of Runga's letter, it had no visible effect on Lakshmi, although Krishna watched her narrowly for several days. It was sufficient for her that he had received it, and had bade her forget that it ever existed. She went about her household duties with the old sweet serenity of countenance, and a mind free as a child's in May-time. In truth, the document to her was innocuous enough. Only one incident of that eventful night remained fresh to her recollection. If her love for Krishna had consumed her thoughts before, that tender kiss and warm embrace had woven a chain between her soul and him that time could never break. Poor Lakshmi! Poor Krishna! If Cupid were a thought-reader, few honeymoons would be spent in heaven!

But if Runga's message conveyed nothing to the mind of Lakshmi, it came as an imperative command to Krishna. It brought him back with a nerve-wrenching shock from the elysium into which he had been allowing himself momentarily to drift. The work for which he had been chosen permitted no

relaxation, no loitering by the wayside to moisten his parched lips. "The eyes of the dead will be upon thee!" The words of his dead father seemed written in blood across his vision. His life had been mapped out for him. It was not his own. It were dangerous to encourage the weaknesses of the flesh.

On the fifth night following his vigil in the shadows of Agra Nook he retired to his study. All day long he had been racked by conflicting desires, and his labours in the dissecting-room of the college represented so much time wasted. As he went up the stairs, with the slow, hesitating, stealthy tread of someone engaged on a nefarious errand, he strained his ears to catch the slightest sound.

Kappuswamy had taken Lakshmi to a festival in the native quarter of the city, and might not return until the following day. A dull, leaden silence rested on the house. Even the drone of insect life outside seemed to have ceased. When he reached his room he started back with a half-smothered cry of alarm as he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. How old he had grown in a single day!

He went to the window, and leaned far out and listened. The lower part of the house was

in complete darkness ; only a small reading-lamp burned in his study. He closed the venetian shutters, and, taking the lamp in his hand, searched the rooms of the house. His suspicions allayed, he returned to his study, sat down at the table, and recalled each work of Runga's letter. Then for an hour he remained lost in thought. Again he went to the shutters and threw them open, looking out across the city—far out to a tiny clump of trees that he had seen but once before, but which was now traced in fire on his memory.

And as he looked the weak flesh cried out for freedom from the enthraldom of the mind. The wild, passionate longings of an emotional man surged through his frame in an unbroken wave. The dark, finely chiselled face, where the strength of the man was reflected, now sagged and quivered and assumed a weakness that it had never before known. The thin, straight lips drooped and twitched, and the proud head fell back into an attitude of supplication.

“ The Sons await the Voice ! ” O God, how weak and impotent it was ! How easy to escape it all ! His hand went to his waist. A low hiss from the direction of the table, and he turned his head quickly, a shaft of

moonlight guiding his gaze. On the bamboo table was a small human skull. He had left it there after a trepanning experiment. Now, as he looked at it, the moonlight fell full upon it, lighting up the hideous, grinning eye-sockets. And as he watched there came out of the left socket the hissing head of a small cobra.

A strange, uncanny smile parted his lips as he moved towards the reptile. It ceased its hissing as he approached. In his eyes gleamed a bright, weird light. He put out his hand and grasped the creature gently yet firmly, and, dragging its body from the skull, laid it on the table before him. He placed the lamp near the scaly, mottled body and bent down to examine it more closely. Then he jumped up with a low cry that was almost a whine.

The cobra was dead !

He picked up the body, and, opening the shutters, threw it far out among the foliage. Then he went back to the table, and, unwinding his dhoti, took from his waist the red-hide belt. With nervous fingers he cut away the stitching, and when at last the strips of palm-leaf, yellow with age, and folded in the shape of wallets, lay before him on the

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table, he encircled them with his arms as though fearful lest an unseen hand should stretch out of the shadows of the room and snatch them from him.

Presently, when his blood pulsated less wildly and his excited brain resumed the normal, he examined the nearest leaf. Pricked in Hindustani, and on the extreme edge, were the words :

“THE BEQUEST OF ACHAYA, SON OF SILVASWAMY.”

He opened the wallet and spread it out on the table. There was an irritating brevity about the thing, and after the opening sentences the testator had chosen to be perplexingly enigmatical :

“ For the realization of my dreams and the dreams of my immediate ancestors I bequeath the wealth of three generations. None can estimate its power. Before it men will fall like the leaves in time of drought. He who would dream as I and mine have dreamed let him read. . . . Smallest yet dearest. Watered by heaven. Look west from the throne that faces the east. Beyond the shadow of the deodar at eventide it lies.”

Krishna read and re-read the cryptogram, and with a quiet smile refolded the wallet and

placed it again in the belt. Then he turned to the other. On the edge of this were pricked the two words "THE DREAM." He opened it and commenced to read, calmly, composedly. Then, of a sudden, the blood rushed in a torrent to his face, leaving his limbs cold and weak and flaccid. The pupils of his eyes leaped to the mouths of their sockets and became two balls of liquid fire.

"That! that!" he screamed, and raised his hands to ward off some hideous apparition of his brain. He sprang away from the table and the terrible Thing that lay there mocking his cowardice. In his movements he overturned and extinguished the lamp. Only for a second was the room in darkness. Was it a trick of his imagination or the hand of the dead?

A thin stream of white light came through the closed shutters and rested on the shrivelled leaves.

With a cry of desperation, he sprang towards the table; but ere he reached it the light had gone, leaving him again in utter darkness. He searched for and found the lamp, relighted it, and sank into his chair, weak and exhausted. His eyes closed, his head dropped forward on the table, and the

perspiration poured from him in a stream. How long he lay there he knew not. It was a stealthy movement behind his chair that brought him to his feet with a hoarse shout.

Graham Dennis, his face white as the face of the dead, confronted him.

“ You—you ! ” Krishna gasped, his hands clenched and the veins of his neck standing out like whipcords. “ How long have you been there ? ”

“ Why, what the deuce is the matter with you, Krish ? You look as if you’d been playing with ghosts.”

“ Never mind me,” said the other wildly ; “ tell me how long you have been in this room.”

“ I have been here four or five seconds,” said Graham in an injured tone of voice ; “ but if I’d known that you had become a raging lunatic, I wouldn’t have taken the trouble to come at all. I saw a light in your study window as I crossed Blett’s Plantation, and as I couldn’t make anyone hear me down below, I just stumbled up your cursed stairs, and knocked a hole in my shin in the doing of it. Are you satisfied ? If you are, I’ll say good night. If you’re not—well, you can go to the devil, although I must say that you

look as if you'd been there once to-night already."

As Graham was delivering himself Krishna seized the wallet and hurriedly concealed it in the folds of his dhoti.

"Forgive me, Graham," he faltered; "it was not my intention to be rude. I have been studying too much. My brain is fagged and subject to these sudden fits. Don't talk about leaving me yet a while. Here, sit down." He pushed a chair towards him and poured out a glassful of wine. "Drink, Graham," he said feebly, holding out the glass with one hand and passing the other wearily over his forehead—"drink, like a good fellow, and forget."

CHAPTER VIII

THREE MEN AND A WOMAN

AS Graham Dennis threw himself into the long rattan chair and proceeded to make himself comfortable, he became conscious of a pair of glistening eyes that were fixed upon him, marking his every movement.

"Well, are you satisfied, old nerve-twister?" he queried, as Krishna sank into a chair opposite him. "What the devil have you been up to? dissecting a ghost, eh?"

Krishna laughed uneasily and refilled his wineglass. His hand was so unsteady that the neck of the decanter rattled a chime on the glass.

"Look here, old fellow," said Graham, with some alarm, "you've got to pitch those books out of the window and sleep for a month, or you'll never see Edinburgh, much less that degree you've set your heart on."

"You're a pessimist—too gloomy for a doctor," Krishna replied, with a peculiar shrug of the shoulders. "As a matter of fact, I don't think that I shall——" He paused abruptly, and held up his glass to the light, as though seeking inspiration there.

"What?" Graham blew out a wreath of smoke, and watched it circle like a cloud

round the other's head. Krishna was silent for a moment.

"Are you a fatalist?" he asked suddenly.

"No, I'm not exactly that; I'm what you might call an 'indifferent.' Men get like that after they've been out here a year or two and had their energy reduced to a yawn and a thirst. Are you?"

"Yes, I think I am; in fact, I know that I am," said Krishna gravely.

"For instance——"

"Well, I shall not go to Edinburgh."

"You what! Oh, shut up, man! You'd give a fellow the blues on his wedding-day."

"I mean it," Krishna went on; "and, by the way, I learned to-day that it was extremely unlikely that you would go up."

"Quite right," said Graham, as though his case did not particularly affect anyone. "That was one of the reasons that led me round to your asylum to-night; but old Mother Gossip seems to have bought a flying machine."

"Anything wrong?"

"On the contrary, everything right. My people are returning, and I might have gone with them; but a two-thou-rupee job has

come along, and—well, I should be a fool to give it a miss.”

“ You are fortunate,” said Krishna, without a shade of envy in his voice ; “ but how about your qualifications, your degrees ? ”

“ Um, they certainly get a miss. Had enough of bone-sawing and liniment-sniffing. Nothing like a change, my boy, for keeping up your interest in life. ‘ Civil Servant ’ doesn’t sound as well, but it becomes the pocket better, and God knows I’ve signed enough chits lately to start a paper-mill.”

“ Civil Servant ! ” Krishna’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“ Um, something to do with the taxes. Don’t know exactly what ; but the less you know about these things the better. Just shut your eyes and throw your pen about, and the others, the—well, you know—will do the grind.”

“ Yes, I know,” said Krishna, with cutting sarcasm ; “ the peons will pull you through.”

“ They get paid for it, I suppose ? ” Graham retorted.

“ Oh yes, they get paid for it,” Krishna acquiesced—“ fifteen rupees a month, if they dress becomingly and are willing to ‘ grind,’ as you call it, long after the usual office-hours.”

"Oh, come, Krish, I don't want to argue with you on socialistic problems. It's too hot for that. If you feel that way inclined, join the staff of the *Bande Mataram*. I didn't seek the job—they brought it to me; so you can't blame me, can you?"

"No, I suppose not," Krishna replied, his brows knitted in thought.

"Well, don't give me the hump before I start on the beastly job. I want the money badly enough. You can't deny that, can you? No. Well, then——" And with the air of one who had spoken the last possible word on the subject he dropped back in his chair with a grunt of relief.

"But why aren't you going up?" he asked presently, looking up from the operation of cigarette-rolling.

"I have work here that will keep me fully occupied for some time to come," said Krishna, signifying by a gesture that he was undesirous of saying more on the subject.

"Luck to you," cried Graham cheerily. "Hope I may live to see you come out on top."

"I hope you may!" There was a kindly gleam of solicitude in Krishna's eyes. Between

the two men existed a strong bond of friendship, the first strand of which was tied in the early days of their school life. Dennis was one of those light-hearted, flamboyant, good-natured Englishmen who, finding themselves in a strange land and among strange people, make up their minds from the very first to take things as they come, and not to go round the corner in search of trouble. While careless and indifferent where his own interests were concerned, he could always find time to admire and encourage ambition in others. No racial prejudices disturbed his peace of mind. It was his voluntary interference on Krishna's behalf in this direction that first drew the native to him. The one was the antithesis of the other, and perhaps that accounted in a large measure for their compatibility of temperament. At the same time, Graham was almost entirely ignorant of the deeper aims and ambitions of the other. Krishna had never sought to enlighten him. Not that he doubted the capabilities of his comprehension or feared his antipathy, for, despite his outward placidity and indisposition to "swat," as he called it, Graham Dennis was capable of greater things than his most generous friend would have given

him credit for. He was the kind of man who seems destined by Providence to glide out of a mother-country and pass the rest of his life in a colony. His was a disposition that would win him greater laurels among a native race than brains could possibly do. It was because of that disposition that Krishna had learned to value his friendship, and he was too jealous of it to jeopardize it by any words or actions that might savour too strongly of agitation.

But Fate was erecting a barrier that neither of them could have foreseen. It made its appearance that night. They had been smoking in silence for a few minutes, when suddenly Graham rose from his chair, walked to the window, and, throwing open the shutter, looked out across the city.

“By Jove! what a night!” he exclaimed. “Wonder what they’d give for a slice of that old moon in London? You have a glorious view from here, Krish. Why, you can see—yes, quite plainly——Come here, old man; look yonder, in the direction of my finger. Do you see that clump of palms and mangoes—there, just beyond the native quarter—there? Now you can see the moonlight just touching the fringe. Look, it is creeping up!

Now you can see the white steps of the veranda. You see it, eh ? ”

Krishna had walked to the window and was looking over his shoulder.

“ Krish ”—there was a catch in his voice that made the other start—“ Krish, she lives there—Charlotte, Miss Bressane. You remember her—at the garden-party ? A beautiful woman, Krish—a good woman.” The last few words died away in a whisper. Neither spoke for a few minutes. Graham quietly closed the shutters and resumed his seat.

“ Suppose you haven’t seen much of that fellow Skew lately ? ” He asked the question lazily, as though he were not particularly anxious for a reply.

“ Only once since the introduction,” said Krishna. “ How long have you known him ? ”

“ About as long as I’ve known Miss Bressane,” was the ambiguous reply.

“ I forgot that I owe you an apology for quarrelling with your parents’ guest.” Krishna was holding out his cigarette at arm’s length, and flicking off the white ash with his long, tapering fingers.

“ Why didn’t you pull his nose, literally instead of metaphorically ? ”

" You hate him ? "

" Hate him ? No, I don't know that I hate anyone. Hatred is only an admission of weakness to the other fellow. By Jove !"—he slapped his knee with gusto—" the pater would credit me with an aphorism. Wonder where I heard it. No, I don't exactly hate the Major, but I certainly dislike him."

" Much ? "

" What a stickler you are for detail ! Well, can't say that I'd sign a crêpe chit if he happened to break his neck or got kissed by a cobra. No more would you ; no more would anybody that I know of."

" I wonder ! " It was half whisper, half sigh.

" What the devil are you driving at ? " Graham demanded irritably.

" I was only thinking. I suppose that is natural ? "

" Natural, but damned annoying."

" Sorry ! Is Major Skew an Englishman, Graham ? "

" God forbid ! Skew ! He's no more Skew than you or I. He's more of a mystery than a Major. Ask him the name of his regiment ! None of the military knows anything about him excepting that he's hunting

for health. Blamed queer country for the quest. I believe he's had something to do with the Volunteers at home. Anyway, he came out here with plenty of introductions to the staff at headquarters, and, although they give him the cold shoulder, he's allowed to go pretty much where he likes."

"Lack of discretion on the part of the military authorities."

"'Tis a bit slack, and the Major's not a fool, mind you. Heard Gennings of the Yorkshires say in the club the other night that the beggar knew more about the fortifications of the country and the disposition of troops than the Old Man himself."

Krishna's cigarette had gone out, and he was leaning forward, his eyes glistening and his lips slightly apart; as Graham paused, he fell back in his chair and assumed an air of disinterestedness.

"I wonder," he said, reaching for another cigarette, "how he became acquainted with Miss Bressane?"

Graham's face was clouded for a moment. "I'd sign a mighty big chit to know," he said sullenly; then, with unwonted fierceness: "But don't you get it into your head that he's anything to her except a friend. I'll—

I'll pull the tongue out of the man that suggests it."

Krishna's eyes became heavy and glazed ; his breath came in painful gasps : something sharp and cold seemed to have been plunged into his side. The next moment he regained his composure, but Graham's voice seemed hard and distant and metallic.

" There's a tennis-party at Agra Nook on Wednesday evening," he was saying. " Will you come ? "

Krishna's eyes opened and closed again wearily.

" She asked me at the mater's show to invite you. Fact ! "

" I will come if you wish it."

" Of course, Skew 'll be there."

" Do you mind ? "

Graham was walking to the window. He turned half round at the question.

" I was thinking of you," he said frankly. He came back to Krishna's side. " The fellow's an unmitigated cad. He was rude to you once, and may be so again."

" Well ? " Krishna's voice was curiously weak.

" Well, you're my friend—that's all " ; and he held out his hand. " Good night, old

swatter," he said cheerfully. "Don't forget the tennis-show. I'll call round for you."

"Good night," said Krishna softly, "and may the pleasures of Wednesday evening meet with your heart's desire."

Graham halted on the threshold, turned, and went over to the window.

"Look!" he said, and there was that in his face that the other had never seen before—"look! Yonder, in that tiny compound, is my heart's desire."

Krishna looked across the city to where the light of the moon fell like a silver mantle on Agra Nook. When he turned again to his study table the only man in India who was really "white" to him had gone.

CHAPTER IX

THE STRANGER FROM NEON

THE unfathomable mystery surrounding Miss Charlotte Bressane, who, as Graham Dennis had on one occasion remarked, "dropped from the rigging of a coaster," was sufficient to insure a crowd at her first tennis-party—the first she had held. It is one of the anomalies of life that, no matter how much men and women may pride themselves on their respectability, a breath of scandal is to their nostrils what an aniseed-ball is to a stoat. Apart from what they termed her eccentric and suspicious mode of living alone, Miss Bressane's marked reticence when the discussion veered round to and bordered on her history threw a doubtful shadow on a personality that even the women admitted was charming. During the early days of her residence in the city she encountered the inevitable frown of distrust, but she met it with a serenity of countenance that alone would have disarmed suspicion in time.

Then Major Skew appeared on the scene, and although his history was a book as sealed as her own, his avowed friendship for her paved the way to toleration of them

both. His "militarism" was sufficient recommendation for him. The world is more generous to a man than to a woman. Before they had been two months in Madras they were able to pick and choose their invitations. The greatest trial of a colonial hostess is the attracting of suitable males to her functions. Miss Bressane as a magnet became invaluable.

When Graham Dennis and Krishna arrived at Agra Nook the tennis tournament was in progress, and a gaily dressed throng of men and women were keeping the native boys on the run with iced drinks and cooling fruit. The hostess, in white chiffon, touched here and there with a loop of blue, was in the centre of a group of simpering, sighing young men, while immediately behind them were Major Skew and a foreigner whom Graham had never before seen. As the late-comers made their appearance, Miss Bressane came forward to greet them. Graham's face flushed as he gently pressed her white tapering fingers; Krishna's was stern and rigid and expressionless.

"I should have been keenly disappointed had you failed to come." She was speaking to him and holding out her hand, but he

seemed to have neither heard nor seen. Yet his black, penetrating eyes were looking down into hers—down into her very soul. When he spoke, his voice was deep and vibrated like the sensitive string of a musical instrument.

“I appreciate the compliment,” he said; and as she drew away her hand a cold smile that was akin to cynicism revealed his white gleaming teeth.

“If Graham had not brought you, I think I should have compelled him to go with me to ferret you out. Bold, eh?” And she laughed—a quiet, seductive laugh that would have thrilled the ecstatic Graham.

“Yes,” he replied calculatingly, “it would have been bold—in a weak woman.”

She turned to Graham with an inquiring look and a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

“Oh, Krishna has an original way of expressing himself at times,” he laughed—“reminds me of a fool hen trying to lay a coloured egg.”

“You will let me introduce you to the other guests?” she said. Her eyes were still on Krishna, her voice tremulous;

vivacity had given place to timidity. Something in the man's mien fascinated, awed her. Only a glance at the dark, set face, with its bright, piercing eyes, and levity changed to drab, grey seriousness. Graham's own broad, honest countenance darkened for an instant ; the troubled look on the woman's aroused in him resentment against the man who appeared to hold his friendship so cheaply. Then his great good-nature asserted itself.

"Come, you old fossil!" he cried ; "we don't want a ghost at the feast."

Krishna started. "I beg your pardon," he said softly to the wondering woman, but there was no contrition in the voice.

They went forward to the group that included Major Skew and the foreigner whom they had noticed at the moment of their arrival. The Major, following a warning glance from Miss Bressane, bowed stiffly. The foreigner came forward with alacrity and stood expectantly before Krishna, rubbing his palms together obsequiously, and drawing in his breath between his teeth. He was exceedingly short of stature, and his lower limbs seemed to be crying out against the discomforts of their European covering. His head was small and peculiarly rounded ;

the hair had been cropped close to the scalp, revealing unsightly blotches that might have been old wounds ; the eyes were more like slits, and the nose was broad and spreading ; the teeth protruded, and showed a prodigality of gold filling.

“ This is Count Cimea,” said Miss Bressane, coming forward, and Krishna could not conceal a smile as the little man drew in his breath with redoubled energy and bowed with the regularity of an automaton. “ Count,” she continued, “ this is Mr. Krishna, of whom I spoke this morning. Your study of life in India would not have been complete had you failed to meet him.”

“ I have often heard of you in Neon,” said the Count, with another bow and a fresh intake of air.

“ Indeed ! ” Krishna was genuinely surprised.

Miss Bressane turned quickly at the Count’s remark. “ I had no idea that you were so famous,” she cried to Krishna. “ The people of Neon have large ears, Count, eh ? ”

“ Neon ! ” It was Krishna who spoke. The word had barely left his lips, when the stolid expression returned to his countenance,

and he appeared not to take the slightest interest in the Count's reply.

The group moved towards the tennis-courts. Major Skew, the Count, and Dennis entered into a controversy on sport generally; Miss Bressane and Krishna brought up the rear. Her old buoyancy of spirits returned.

"You had not met the Count before?" She asked the question carelessly, but he gave her a suspicious glance.

"No," he said shortly. "Why do you ask?"

"Merely curiosity. He is an omniscient sort of man, and when I mentioned your name this morning it was obvious to me that it was not the first time he had heard it."

"You are observant, Miss Bressane."

"I can't afford to be otherwise in this country. I should die of ennui else."

"I believe that many of my countrymen have studied and are studying in Neon. It is so much cheaper than in Europe."

"And more congenial in other respects?" She seemed anxious to draw him out, and he was equally determined not to be drawn.

"In Neon there is nothing of that racial prejudice about which you are so bitter."

"I have never been there, so cannot say," he said abruptly; but she refused to be shaken off so easily.

"The Count is a very intellectual man, I should say, but I believe that he is only a type of a remarkable people."

"They are certainly an observant people."

"And the West seems only too anxious to encourage that particular faculty. Why are they so blind at home?"

"Are international politics your hobby?" he asked playfully, and the question had the unexpected effect of changing her mood entirely.

"Men and women in the East have little else to think about," she replied, somewhat lamely. "You see, we have not the social attractions of London or Paris to keep us amused; a little scandal now and then breaks the monotony, as it were—but even scandal has grown tame."

"How long have you known the Count?"—this irrelevantly.

"About a couple of days. Major Skew

made his acquaintance and introduced him."

"Government servant, perhaps?"

"Can't say. Adventurer, I thought." The look in her eyes convinced him that she was trying to throw him off the scent, so he dropped the subject.

A burst of laughter from Graham and a look of pained surprise on the face of the Count diverted the thoughts of the man and woman as they sauntered up to the trio. "You're quite right," Graham was saying, "we have an old song to that effect, but I can assure you there are heaps of white slaves in India. Take that young man who is returning the ball now. Do you think he would stay in this climate a single day if he could get out of it? Never heard of a chit-bound slave, Count? Well, you will if you stay here long enough. Steel chains are nothing to a chitty's meshes, and the worst of it is a chitty is absolutely indispensable. You commence by pushing him off the pavement when you meet him in the street, and you finish by going down on your knees to him. He's the canker-worm of the East, but it'll take a sharp hoe to weed him out."

"But you British are so domineering, so strong, so——"

"Yes, but only human, Count, and it's wonderful the extremes a man'll go to in order to raise the wind at the end of the month. And there are some deuced short months in the colonies."

Miss Bressane put a dainty white hand over his mouth. "Poor boy! you seem to speak so feelingly," she laughed.

"Well, I've been through it," Graham confessed, with a wry face. "I don't suppose I'll ever get a chance to talk to them at home, but if I had my way, I'd prosecute all parents who allowed their sons to sneak out of England and swelter in a colony under false colours."

"You're enigmatical, Graham," she smiled, "but I believe there is some little philosophy in your mind."

"What I mean," said Graham, taking off his topee and wiping his perspiring forehead—"what I mean is that the wrong sort of fellow comes out here. Either he has too much money to necessitate his working for more, or he has so little that he spends most of his time in running round to chitties for a loan."

“ But the false colours ? ” Miss Bressane insisted.

“ Well, there’s a kind of youngster sent out here who might have blossomed into a respectable citizen at home. Perhaps his father has a couple of acres of ground and the proverbial cow, and when the lad comes out here as a shipping-clerk, or something of the sort, he soon learns that cows and farming aren’t dignified. Social attractions are limited, so he can’t pick and choose, and when Mrs. Grabb invites him to a bridge-party, it puts pepper on his tail. He soon loses what little money he’s got, and then he is initiated into the mysteries of chit-signing. It’s a wonderful thing, is the chit. You commence by signing one for a drink, and you get so used to its simplicity that the time soon comes when you’d willingly sign one for your seat in heaven. It’s the poor man’s cheque-book, and that’s where the false colours come in. Mrs. Grabb and her yellow-haired confederates fool him into believing that he’s two breeds better than Don Juan. They look up at him from the card-table, and call him a ‘sporting dog,’ because when he’s lost two hundred rupees without squealing, he just grins and signs a

chit for the amount. Then Miss Softeyes on his left begins to look glum, because she's been stuck in the same way. He signs another chit for her, and passes it on to Mrs. Grabb. They call him 'Bertie' and 'old boy' and stick him in the ribs with their fingers. He goes to his bungalow with the firmly rooted impression that he's the gayest dog in Madras, and if his coolie doesn't come to heel at three in the morning with a cool melon and a bromo-seltzer, he wallops him with the heel of an old boot. I suppose he's justified in calling himself a man of the world, but somehow I can't help thinking that both Mrs. Grabb and her pals would have more respect for him if he'd give a little more thought to the old man at home, who may be smoking dried tea-leaves, as he hoes his turnips, because he can't find anybody to sign a tobacco chit for him."

It was the first time that Dennis had preached a sermon, and although Miss Bressane gave him a laugh for his pains, he felt better for having delivered himself.

"Come," she said to Graham, "you and I will oppose the Bairds in a double. If you play tennis as well as you preach, I shall have no reproach to offer at the end of the

game." She took his arm and led him towards the nets, and as he went he threw back at Krishna a glance that was eloquent of all he felt.

They won their game, and Graham led his partner to a chair with the pride of a chieftain bringing home a bride. To a woman less versed in sign-reading the glowing admiration in his eyes would have told its own tale. His arm stole protectingly round the back of her chair. She closed her eyes, as though the exertion in the game had taxed her strength. He did not speak, being content to sit there and watch. Once, when she opened her eyes languorously, she found his head bent low to hers, and she aroused herself with a start, a faint flush pinking her cheeks.

"What a hostess!" she cried. "What will my guests think of me?"

"Does it matter what they think?" he asked quietly, toying with her hair.

"You know them better than I do."

"Unfortunately, I do. They remind me of a crowd of disagreeable people on a ship. You're in for a long voyage, so the wisest policy is to tolerate them with the best possible grace, and pray God that the mate'll

pile the boat on the rocks or get you to your anchorage before your reason gives out."

"You're a dreadful cynic and a pessimist at heart, Graham."

He shook his head and laughed with her. "Optimism in India is another name for insanity."

"Then, why do you remain?"

He winced at the pertinence of the question.

"You are not in that slave-galley to which you alluded this evening?"

"No, thank God! I paid my ransom long ago; but there are one or two reasons why I should not care to leave in a hurry."

"One is?" She was beating a tattoo on her knee with a tennis-racquet; her chin was tilted provokingly, and her eyes were laughing into his.

"The first—well, I've just fallen into a good berth, and, having already been burned to a cinder, I might as well stick in the oven a little longer."

"And the second?"

"Can't you guess?"

She looked up wonderingly, and then, when the big sun-wrinkled hand touched her fingers, a low cry of pain broke from her lips. All the

merriment died out of her face, and she sat up in the chair as though she had been struck.

"You don't mean that, Graham? You're fooling, aren't you?" The solicitude in her voice cut him to the quick.

"I do! I do, Charlotte. If ever a man——"

"Then forget it, boy—forget it all, and now." Her earnestness sobered him, and stayed the passionate words that were on his lips. "If I have—if—oh, Graham boy, don't say that I've given you cause to think like that!" She seemed obsessed with a fear that shook every nerve in her body. He remained silent, crushed. "I'm awfully sorry, Graham." He felt her fingers wind round his. "Oh, I'm sorry." She looked about her despairingly. The guests were all out of earshot. "I'm not going to lie to you, boy. I like you more than you will ever know, and I have known all along that you liked me; but——"

"But, Charlotte?"

"I thought you were stronger than most of them, and could appreciate a friendship for its own sake, and not for what it might lead to."

"I am only a man, Charlotte."

"Yes, I know, and one of the best—the very best. You have always been good to me, boy, and God knows there have been times when I needed kindness."

He lifted his eyes from the ground, and a lump came into his throat when he saw the tears racing down her cheeks. He opened his lips to speak, but, smiling bravely, she went on: "Let me go through with it, boy. We might as well understand one another now as later, and—and I don't want to lose your friendship."

"That can never happen."

"Ah! you don't know. There are things that you would be the first to condemn."

"Is it so serious as that?" His face was grave and deathly white.

She thought she caught the meaning of his look, and shook her head. "No, not that, boy," leaving him in doubt as to what "that" meant.

"Then, what is there to fear?"

"Don't ask me—please don't, Graham! Let us go on as before until——"

"Until?"

"Until it is impossible—that's all."

"There is no one else, Charlotte?"

“No one.” She rose to her feet, and as he took her hand, he could feel her trembling.

“Thank you, little woman,” he whispered. “Perhaps it was too much to expect, but I’m going to live on hope, despite what you’ve said.”

The sun had gone ; a night-bird was calling to its mate in the leaves of the acacia above their heads. Graham hesitated a moment ; then, raising her hand to his lips, he kissed it tenderly.

“Poor boy ! ” she murmured, and, turning, ran lightly up the path to the house. He lit a cigarette and went in search of Krishna. His heart was light—lighter than it had ever been before. She had given him hope, and that was worth living for.

And then the echo of her appeal to him to forget came floating down through the leaves, and, like a rain-cloud, befogged him. What was it that she had locked in her heart ? what secret that he might not share ?

The sound of voices put a stop to his reflections. He paused in his walk and listened out of natural curiosity, and without any desire to play the eavesdropper. He heard the name Skew mentioned and then his own. Taking the cigarette from his lips,

that the burning end might not betray his presence, he parted the leaves of a traveller-palm that hid him from the speakers and peered through.

Krishna and Count Cimea were whispering together !

“ To-morrow at midnight, at your house,” he heard the Count say ; and the two returned to the house by different paths.

CHAPTER X

THE EYES OF THE IDOL

WHEN Graham reached the house he found the majority of the tennis-players had left, but several ladies, with their intimate male friends, had settled down at the inevitable card-tables. Miss Bressane was moving in and out of the room with her customary vivacity, throwing a jest here and a snub there, whichever happened to be appropriate. Krishna, the Count, and Major Skew were seated at one table, with the spirits and soda-water before them. All three appeared to be in a hilarious mood, and the Major, his face flushed and his eyes puffed, was actually relating a story for Krishna's ears only. Graham emitted a low whistle of surprise and joined the trio at the table.

It may seem incredible to the Western mind that the house of a single lady could be given up to the entertainment of a crowd of people of both sexes, and the kind of entertainment that to the more Puritanical might savour of an orgy. But if Mrs. Grundy lived in some colonies she would soon learn to stretch the limits of decency. Prudery is a cold-weather saint, and dies a natural death when she walks

into a colony where the temperature is never below 84° in the shade and the white population never more than a few thousands.

Graham seated himself next the Count and joined in the conversation, which turned upon the occult. The Major and the Count monopolised the conversation, Krishna being content for the most part to throw in an observation here and there. The Count related instances of the supernatural that had come to his ears in his own land, and each instance was explained away in a more or less satisfactory manner by the excited and somewhat boisterous Major.

“Do you believe in the supernatural?”

Miss Bressane had paused near the group. She was looking with a half-amused, half-incredulous smile at Krishna, who answered gravely: “We cannot afford to laugh at science.”

“Ho, ho!” roared the Major; “and where does the science come in? Tell me that. Give me a single instance of it, and I’ll not say another word.”

“Yes, do,” Miss Bressane cried laughingly, and then in a second her face became grave. A clap of thunder shook the bungalow,

and the women dropped their cards with faint screams.

"Damn these monsoons!" the Major growled. "I've got five miles to go"; and he reached across for more soda.

A few minutes later the laughter was renewed by the Major falling from his chair, and in the confusion that followed the request that had been made of Krishna was forgotten.

Miss Bressane had gone on to the veranda to mark the weather, and was standing alone, with one elbow resting against the wooden pillar. The rain was beating down the foliage, and lightning flashed through the cocoanut-palms with alarming frequency. She was thinking of all that had happened that evening. Graham's words came back to her.

"Poor old boy!" she muttered. "If he only knew——"

"He would be happy with your sympathy, Miss Bressane!"

She wheeled round with a cry of fear. Krishna, a strange, deep fire in his large eyes, was standing behind her.

"I did not know that you were listening," she said, with a touch of anger.

"I crave your pardon," he replied, and

she flinched before the steady gaze. "I came to look for you that I might beg a favour."

She recovered herself and stammered an apology.

"It is this," he went on, appearing not to have noticed her embarrassment. He held out a small wooden idol, a hideous-looking thing in ebony, that had doubtless been taken from a Hindu temple. It was carved in a crouching position, and two small green and yellow stones served for eyes. "I took the liberty of removing it from your side-board, and came to ask if you valued it at all."

"You are welcome to it," she said graciously, taking it from him and examining it.

"The fact of its being there convinced me that you are not so incredulous with regard to the occult as you pretended to be a few minutes ago."

"I don't quite follow your argument," she faltered. A strange, depressing feeling of intense loneliness came over her as she met his eyes. She made a movement as though she would return to the house, then the consciousness of her cowardice forced itself upon

her, and she compressed her lips and steadied herself against the pillar. She felt nervous in this man's presence. She wished that Graham would join them and save her from betraying her fear.

"Well, what do you think of it?" She knew that he referred to the idol in her hand but his eyes never left hers.

"I don't think anything about it," she said confusedly. "It has been on my side-board for months. You are welcome to it. I—— Oh! my God! Look! look! Its eyes—eyes—are moving! O God, help me! help!" And she sank, fainting, into his arms.

Her wild cries had alarmed the others, and they trooped out on to the veranda.

"What has happened?" asked Graham hoarsely, taking the unconscious form in his arms as though it were the form of a child.

"I think the lightning must have startled her," said Krishna in a low, calm voice. "I came out here for a breath of air, and found her on the floor."

Graham carried her into the house and, with the tenderness of a woman, laid her on the couch. He suffered none to approach

her, not even the frightened women-folk who, with white faces and breathless whispers, crowded round. With his own hand he tore away the flimsy muslin wrappings from her white throat, and with his own handkerchief, drenched in perfume, he smoothed the clammy marble brow.

“Stand back,” he cried authoritatively, “and throw the shutters open. Hi ! punkah-wāla, juldi kuro ! curse you !” and he hurled an empty water-bottle at the sleeping boy.

The Major was the first to recover himself. “It is only the heat,” he mumbled ; “leave her alone and she’ll come round.” He stopped short when he caught Graham’s terrible look.

Presently she opened her eyes, and the indescribable expression of terror that was in them forced an exclamation from the lips of the man bending over her : “My God ! what’s wrong ? What has happened, Charlotte ? ”

“Ugh !” She shuddered and pulled the wrappings round her throat again. “It was nothing,” she murmured, “nothing, Graham, only——” He felt her fingers close round his.

“ Was it the lightning that startled you ? It came so suddenly.”

“ No, it was——” She saw among the faces surrounding her two penetrating eyes that seemed to be hanging on her syllables. “ Yes, it must have been the lightning,” she whispered, trying to smile at her own fears. “ How foolish of me to faint ! Thank you, thank you, Graham ! ” as he placed a glass of water to her lips. “ I feel quite well already.”

“ We had better retire, Miss Bressane ; it is unkind of us to impose upon you in your condition.”

It was Krishna who had come to her side, and Graham felt her fingers tighten instinctively on his.

“ No, please don’t go,” she hastened, rising from the couch ; “ resume your games. The night is young, and I should never forgive myself for spoiling your evening.”

With indecent haste they returned to the tables, leaving Graham to minister to her needs. In his heart a fire was burning that years of indifference, no matter how studied, could not extinguish. It was one of those moments in a man’s life when all that is noblest in him comes to the surface and

glorifies him for what he is, and not for what he has been.

A few of the guests played on for another hour, and then begged to be excused. Only two of the women—one the wife of a Colonel known off the parade-ground as the “May-flower,” because of his Presbyterian tendencies, and one “first seasoner”—remained with the hostess and the men: Krishna, Major Skew, the Count, and Graham Dennis. They continued their games and conversation for two more hours, and were thinking of retiring when another storm, fiercer than the last, broke over the district. It was impossible for the women to venture out in their light clothing. The men volunteered to go in search of conveyances. Graham suggested that the men brave the elements, and leave the ladies in possession of the bungalow till morning. All these propositions were negatived by the whimsical yet startling suggestion of the Colonel’s wife that they should have a little music and all stay in the house, providing that the hostess could accommodate the ladies in her room, the men to make the best of native mats and share the remaining apartments.

To Graham’s astonishment, Miss Bressane

offered no objection. It occurred to him that her sense of propriety was being sacrificed to lingering fears of the something that had terrified her earlier in the evening. The upshot of it all was that the party decided to stay, and the "boys" were roused from their slumbers to make ready the rooms and unroll the mats. The Major and the Count professed to regard the whole thing as a huge joke, Krishna was silent, as usual, and Graham went about with doubt written across his sunburnt forehead.

On the ground floor of Agra Nook were the dining-room, a reception-room, and one bedroom. The servants' quarters stood away from the main building, but were connected with a passage roofed with dried grass and bamboo. There were three bedrooms on the top floor of the bungalow, forming three sides of a square. The window of the room assigned to Graham overlooked the roofed passage already referred to, and on the immediate right, but on the ground floor, was the window of the dining-room.

It was after midnight when the ladies retired, but the men remained over their whisky and cigars for another hour or so. It had been arranged that the Count and the

Major should occupy one room, Graham and Krishna taking the other two. Major Skew was beginning to show signs of having pandered to his thirst, and the Count seemed even less capable of taking a sober view of things. Graham's mind had been rendered chaotic by the bewildering incidents of the evening, but it was with great reluctance that he followed the lead of the others when they moved towards the stairs.

"I tell you, Krish, I don't like this business," he whispered, as they went up together.

"I have heard of Europeans paying less respect to propriety," was the reply.

"Oh, I'm not squeamish—don't think that ; but I tell you I don't like this. If it hadn't been for one thing I'm hanged if I'd stay. The whole of Madras will chortle over this, damn them ! "

"What thing ? "

"You know what I mean. I believe that dear girl was frightened out of her wits by something or other, and was only too glad to have us in the house to-night. I don't believe that you understand the position, or you wouldn't stand there with a face as stolid as that of a blind mule."

“What position? You’re talking to your own unexpressed thoughts.”

The other men had entered their room. Krishna was standing with a hand on the latch of his door.

“What position?” Graham echoed. “Well, there are four men and three women in this house. Do you want me to speak in plainer terms?”

“My dear fellow, honour is a stronger force than lack of opportunity.”

“What the devil do you mean by that?” cried Graham, his eyes ablaze, and his big, strong frame quivering with anger. “Do you think I’m concerned about the dangers those women run in *this* house? By Jove! I’d strangle any man here who injured them by so much as a look. It’s the danger from outside, on the morrow, that I fear. You don’t understand the voracity of that beast Scandal.”

Krishna opened the door of his room. “Good night,” he said wearily. “Sleep well, and in the morning you will realize that the excitement of to-night magnified your fears. You see that I sleep in the room next to yours. Call me if anything untoward happens.”

Graham waited until he heard the key turn in the lock before he entered his own room.

And that night something did happen—something that came to Graham's already troubled mind as a blinding, biting sand-storm comes to the sun-parched, despairing wanderer on the desert.

CHAPTER XI

TRUMP CARDS

AFTER hearing the key turned in the lock of Krishna's door, Graham quietly undressed, and, lighting a cigarette, threw himself down on the rice-mat. Although the hour was late, the activity of his brain drove sleep away. He lay with his face turned towards the window, listening to the rain driving through the trees and spattering with noisy clatter on the roof. Vainly he tried to collect his thoughts, to think out calmly and deliberately each incident of that eventful evening. Now he was standing with her beneath the spreading arms of the acacia ; he was looking down into her great, soulful eyes ; her lips were parted and challenging his ; he was bending down to them. A little more, and there were Krishna's dark eyes peering at them through the undergrowth. Why Krishna ? He asked the question aloud, then fell to dreaming of her again. He was raising her white, delicate hand to his lips. She was panting like a frightened fawn. He could feel the tremor that surged through her. His lips were touching her fingers. The cry of his heart was swelling up in his throat, and there was Krishna again,

and behind him the ugly little Count with the narrow eyes.

He got up and walked to the window. The rain had ceased, but the wind of the south-west monsoon was driving the heavy clouds across the moon. A thick, humid vapour was rising from the half-baked ground. He went back to his mat, and noticed for the first time the whisky and siphon that had been placed near the head-roll. He blessed the thoughtfulness of the "boy," and poured himself out a stiff tumblerful of the spirit. It might soothe his restlessness and induce sleep. He raised the glass and——

A soft, stealthy footfall outside his door arrested the tumbler as it reached his lips. He replaced the glass on the floor and listened. Instinct told him that whoever the visitor might be, an ear was glued to the keyhole. Graham simulated sleep by snoring loudly and regularly. He glanced round for a weapon. The soda-siphon suggested itself, and he gripped it by the neck, snoring loudly the while. To his surprise, the door was not tried. He heard the footsteps die away in the stillness, and all was quiet again. Stealing to the window, he looked down at the servants' quarters, but there was not a movement that

could arouse suspicion. Experience of his habits taught him that the native thief preferred to pilfer the servants' meagre savings rather than risk the revolver-shots of the European. He was about to turn away from the window and call Krishna, when suddenly a tiny stream of light poured out from between the shutters of the dining-room below him. Only for a second did it glimmer among the foliage. Whoever was moving about in the room had realized the danger of a light and had quickly turned it off. It was a bright, white light, and not one that could have come from an oil-lamp, such as was used in the bungalow. The fact convinced the watcher that it was not a native with whom he had to deal.

Undesirous of raising a false alarm—for, after all, it might be one of the servants returning in search of something that had been left on the supper-table—Graham waited in silence for a few minutes. Then another and an awful solution of the mystery suggested itself to his mind, but he dismissed it as unworthy of him. "Honour is a stronger force than lack of opportunity." Krishna's words recurred to him, and he hated himself for thinking as he had done. Then another

soft footfall outside his door hurried him back to his mat, and again his snores proved an effective subterfuge.

But the mystery was deepening. He could bear the suspense no longer. His hand was on the door, when a new idea occurred to him. Slipping on his clothing, he quietly opened the shutters of the window. The distance from the sill to the grass roof of the passage was only four or five feet. He dropped down noiselessly and reached the ground. The rain had commenced to fall again, and the pattering on the broad leaves of the palms helped to drown any noise that he made. He crept on his hands and knees to the shutter through which the light had streamed. He found the chink in the woodwork, and peered in. On the opposite side of the dining-room was another window, the shutters of which had been left partly open. Through the crevice a shaft of moonlight poured into the room. At first Graham could not distinguish any living object, but as he watched the tiny bright light burst out again, and then he saw a spectacle that filled him with astonishment and burning indignation.

In one corner of the room stood a small writing-desk of the Davenport pattern, and,

kneeling near it, guided in his movements by a small electric scarf-pin fastened on the breast of his sleeping-suit, was Count Cimea !

It was evident that he was bent on forcing the lock without leaving too obvious traces of its having been tampered with. He was working quickly, yet noiselessly, and at intervals he turned off the light, as though to satisfy himself that no one was moving overhead.

Once he turned his head in the direction of Graham, and the expression on it almost startled the watcher into betraying his presence. It was an evil, cunning face. The lines of dissipation that had marked it on the previous evening had disappeared. Evidently he had feigned intoxication in order to disarm suspicion. The oblique, crafty eyes were gleaming in triumph, and, when at last the lid of the desk was opened, the thick Eastern lips parted in a broad smile of satisfaction. Quickly he thrust his hands into the pigeon-holes, turning over the various letters and documents that lay within. When he alighted on the foolscap that he appeared to be in search of, he rapidly broke the seal.

It was impossible for Graham to distinguish what was written on the paper, but apparently

it astounded the Count. His little eyes bulged and his hands trembled so violently that the paper shook as though blown by a wind. Then, recovering himself, he proceeded, with extraordinary despatch, to rearrange the contents of the desk, and, taking a sheet of clean foolscap, he commenced to make a copy of that which he had stolen. As he worked his face expanded in a sinister grin. Whatever the copy, it amused him greatly. All his movements were so deliberate and calculated that Graham concluded he belonged to the expert class of Continental thieves about whose exploits so much had lately been heard. And this was the man with whom he had dined and supped—a man who had accepted the hospitality of a confiding woman in order to rob her during the night.

At last the task was over. The copy was completed and sealed. Graham waited breathlessly for the next move. The Count held the two papers up in the light of his pin ; the copy he returned to the desk. Then he rose and stood for a moment, apparently cudgelling his brains for a hiding-place. He was too clever a thief to carry the paper on his person and run the risk of being searched. Stepping lightly across the room, he picked

up his walking-stick, which had been left in the corner overnight. It was a curiously carved stick, and the watcher at the window felt that, if necessary, he could identify it among a thousand. The Count deftly unscrewed the ferrule, rolled up the foolscap, and inserted it in the hollow of the stick. The ferrule replaced, he left the stick in the corner, stretched himself lazily, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He even lifted the spirit decanter and poured himself out a glassful of whisky, which he swallowed neat without so much as a wink.

A cloud drifted across the moon, and once again the room was plunged in darkness. When the light reappeared the Count was groping his way to the door. Graham saw him start back in terror as, in the semi-blackness, his outstretched hand touched the cold steel of an ancient suit of armour which stood near the door, and served the purpose of a hatstand. Another minute and he was gone.

Graham himself was about to withdraw, satisfied that one act of the little drama was over, when a movement behind the shutters on the other side of the room arrested his attention.

“What in the name of——” he began softly, when the shutters opened noiselessly and Miss Bressane peered into the room.

“Great heavens! What is the meaning of it all?” Graham muttered.

The woman’s face was deathly pale, and when the moonlight fell upon her he perceived that she was dressed only in her night-robes. As she stepped down from the window her bare feet peeped out, their clear whiteness standing out in striking relief against the dark matting. Her robe was thrown open at the neck, as though she had started hurriedly from her bed, without waiting to study her appearance. Her hair fell in masses about her like a dark wrapper. She paused for a second, her hand on the shutter, the moonlight playing lovingly upon her features. Her head was inclined to catch the slightest sound, her eyes wide open in fear and apprehension.

Graham, thrilled as he never had been thrilled and his heart beating wildly, watched her with growing bewilderment. He felt powerless to intervene. His tongue might have been tied with threads of steel; his limbs were as the limbs of a fascinated, helpless creature in the face of impending disaster which it could not avert. But in that moment,

when her soft, supple form stood against the window, caressed by the white arms of the moon, he saw her as he had never seen her before. He was not by any means an imaginative man, but she appeared to him then as an angel newly descended from heaven.

And her quest ?

Slowly she crept to the writing-desk, opened it, and ran her eyes over the papers. She seized with alacrity upon the one the Count had placed there, stopped a moment to listen, then crept across to the walking-stick. She unscrewed the ferrule, took out the original paper and substituted the copy. Graham caught a glimpse of her face as she recrossed the room, and he smiled in sympathy with her look of triumph. Returning to the writing-desk, she put back the precious paper, carefully turned the key in the lock, and left the room by the door as the Count had done.

“ And they call that the weaker sex ! ” muttered Graham. “ She’s trumped the Count’s trick with a vengeance. And now, good Lord, what may be the next move in this game of hide-and-seek ? ”

As if in answer to his half-whispered invocation, the steel suit of armour moved, opened, and the figure of a man stepped out.

Graham's eyes leaped in their sockets and a gurgling sound burst from his lips. The man in the room stopped dead and remained, out of the light of the moon, as motionless as the steel figure that had been his hiding-place. Graham held his breath, and the man, after listening intently for the sound to be repeated, crossed to the desk, inserted a key of his own, took out the fateful foolscap, scanned it quickly, and placed it in his pocket. Then he, too, left the room by the door, and as he passed through the shaft of light Graham saw the quiet, cynical smile that was playing about the corners of his mouth.

It was Krishna !

Numb with amazement, Graham climbed back to his bedroom, removed his clothes, and lay down on his mat to think. Some plot was on foot, but what ? And she, Charlotte, the woman for whose smiles he would willingly lay down his life, was implicated in some way or other. He began to see why Krishna had been so anxious to stay in the house. He began to see a reason for every "innocent" movement that had led up to Charlotte's swooning on the veranda. Was that part of the plot ?

He put his hand to his forehead, and

withdrew it—wet and cold and damp. He remembered her words beneath the acacia: “There are things that you would be the first to condemn.” They recurred to him with terrible vividness. What did she mean? And Krishna!—what rôle was he playing in the drama?

He reached for the tumblerful of whisky which he had left on the floor near his mat. He must soothe his nerves and rest. He lifted the glass to his lips, and, with an exclamation of horror, lowered it again.

“The deuce!” he growled. “Whew! So they deemed it necessary to keep me quiet for an hour or two.” He smelt the liquor again and smiled. “There are bunglers in the party. A little harmless laudanum—enough for five hours’ healthy sleep, I should say. The beggars are considerate, anyway, but I call it a damned insult to the intelligence of a medical student.”

CHAPTER XII

THE OTHER MAN

GRAHAM was the last to take his seat at the breakfast-table next morning. As he entered the room he was almost led to believe that the incidents of the previous night were but the phantasmagoria of a nightmare. Miss Bressane was serving the coffee, and she paused with a cup in her hand to wish him "Good morning!" The Colonel's wife was chatting merrily with Krishna. Even the Count had an air of tranquillity about him, and had engaged the Major in an animated discussion on the relative merits of floating mines and submarines.

"Lazy!" Miss Bressane called. "Even the invalid was up before you."

"Perhaps the invalid did not sleep so soundly," he replied significantly, scrutinizing her face as he reached for his coffee. She did not betray herself by the slightest movement, and the others did not gather anything, apparently, from the remark. He glanced casually round the room. There was the suit of armour, that might never have been touched, judging from its appearance. He could discern even a thin coating of dust on

the visor. A vase of roses had been placed on the writing-desk in the corner.

Breakfast over, they parted from the hostess, and in rickshaws took their several ways to their homes. It was midday when a coolie from Agra Nook arrived at the Slaney-Dennis bungalow with a message for Graham. He was lying in a chair on the veranda, awaiting the tiffin-bell, when the message arrived; but when he caught a glimpse of the handwriting on the envelope, he sprang up as though he had inadvertently sat on a cobra. He tore open the envelope and read :

“ DEAR GRAHAM,

“ Can you run over at once? Something urgent—terribly urgent.

“ C. B.”

A gharry was passing the bungalow at the moment. Without any hesitation he ran down the garden and leaped into the vehicle. “ Agra Nook, and quickly,” he cried; and the driver, with painful experience of white sahibs’ irritability, yelled at his pony like one suddenly possessed of a devil.

She was waiting on the veranda for him. A glance at her face recalled every incident of

the night's mystery. Her cheeks were pallid, and a hunted, despairing expression dwelt in her eyes. Agitation showed itself in the way she plucked at the sleeves of her morning wrapper.

"Thank God you've come!" she breathed, almost dragging him into the dining-room.

He did not question her—just followed, mute and submissive. The first thing that attracted his attention was the writing-desk, now open, with its contents scattered on the floor.

"I want you to help me, Graham. Can you? Will you?" Her hand was on his arm, her appealing face close to his.

"Help you, Charlotte?" It was a low vibrating cry—the cry of a waiting, hungry man, to whom at last is vouchsafed the protection of the woman he loves. It was the upheaval of emotion long suppressed, and it brought the colour back to her cheeks.

"Anything! anything!"

She allowed his arm to encircle her shoulders—allowed him to draw her tightly to him. There was refuge in his big strong arms, a haven that meant peace.

"Something has happened, Graham—some-

thing so terrible that my poor brain is nigh to bursting."

"Go on, Charlotte." His face had assumed a pallor that startled her, and she felt his arms tighten round her.

"There was something in that desk that meant more to me than I can tell you of. It has been stolen, and stolen during the night!"

"What was it?" The cold ring made her wince.

"A document, Graham—an ordinary sheet of foolscap, sealed with a grey seal."

"An ordinary sheet of foolscap!" There was a sneer in his voice, and she drew back in alarm. "Charlotte, look up at me. Now! An ordinary sheet of foolscap! Have you sent for me to test my credulity? Look me straight in the eyes, little woman, and tell me if my love is so cheap that you cannot afford to give me a little of your confidence."

"Don't talk like that, Graham—please don't. You agreed only yesterday. I want you to help me—you, only you. Here in this country I have only one friend that I can trust implicitly—you, Graham boy; I mean you. That is why I sent for you."

He took her two hands, stretched out to him so beseechingly.

"This document does not belong to me, Graham. I swear it, although it was in my desk. It—— Oh, boy, can't you see my dilemma, and be sorry for me? A sheet of foolscap sealed with a grey seal. You could not mistake it among a thousand. The seal is a broken stiletto—my own design—and I can give you the first clue, if you will only say that you'll help me."

"To whom does it belong, Charlotte?"

Her gesture of impatience annoyed him. He dropped her hands and turned as though he would leave.

"Oh, Graham, can't you trust me? can't you feel for me just a little?"

He was back at her side, clasping her wildly, passionately. "Feel for you, Charlotte? I do, and I want to help you, kiddie. But can't you understand my position? How can you expect me to work in the dark? This document, upon which so much seems to depend, is not yours, you say. Then, how can its disappearance affect you to—to this extent?" And he held her at arm's length. "You can acquaint those who lodged it with you of the loss, and doubtless they will seek the aid of the police."

The long silence that followed was broken

only by her deep and laboured breathing. Her brow was puckered in thought.

“Graham boy”—she was clinging to him for support; all self-restraint was thrown to the winds—“Graham boy, look at me. Listen! What price would you set on the love of a woman such as I?”

“What price?” He caught at her arms—her soft, warm arms—and drew them round his neck. “What price? Oh, my God!” he cried huskily, “my life and more!”

“Graham”—she took him at the flood of his emotion—“say you will help me. You can find it; I know you can. Bring it back to me, and——”

“And?”

“Not yet, Graham—not yet. Just promise, and then let me—let me think.”

“Yes, I will find it, if it is possible to find it.”

“It is. You know who were in the house last night.”

“And you suspect?”

“The Count.”

“Krishna might help us,” he mused and watched her face narrowly.

“No, no!” she cried hurriedly. “Graham,

I do not like him. He—he is not like other men. He frightens me.”

“ Did Major Skew know that the document was in the desk ? ” It was a shot at random, and she fell.

“ Of course,” she exclaimed, and then, conscious of the trap into which she had fallen, she fell back into a chair with a low moan of anguish.

“ Of course ! ” he echoed. “ Why ‘ of course ’ ? You are fooling me, blinding me ! ” The words poured out in an angry torrent. He strode across the room and seized his sun-hat. She sprang to her feet and clutched his arm.

“ I will tell you, Graham—yes, I’ll tell you. Wait. Yes, the Major knew that it was there. It was his—his and mine. O boy, trust me ! I feel so helpless.”

“ Charlotte ”—cold and metallic, the word chilled her—“ what is the Major to you ? ”

She shrank from him and passed her hand wearily over her brow.

“ Tell me,” he demanded hoarsely. “ Don’t wait to conjure up a lie. No answer ? Is it true, then, what Madras has said of you ? Is it true what Scandal’s emissaries have reported ?—true that this house of yours is

but a weak, miserable ruse to hide a liaison, and that you are nothing but his——”

She strode towards him, her head thrown back defiantly, her dark eyes flashing.

“ They are liars ! ” There was no trace of feminine weakness on her face now ; she was the strong-nerved woman prepared to vindicate her honour at any cost. “ Liars, all of them ; and you—you are a coward for repeating their hideous scandal. Go !—go back and tell them what I have said. I ask you for nothing now, only this : if you have one spark of honour, respect my confidence of this morning. Forget what I have asked you to do for me and leave me to fight my own battle.”

He hesitated, took a step towards her, but she waved him back. “ Please go,” she repeated, and flung wide the door.

CHAPTER XIII

SOLVING A MYSTERY

GRAHAM DENNIS accepted his dismissal as any other sensible man would have done in the circumstances. There are some women incapable of being misunderstood. Such a woman was Miss Bressane. As he rode back he writhed under her taunt of "coward." What a fall from Love's pedestal! How he reproached himself for his crass stupidity! She had appealed to him with tears in her eyes for help in the moment of trial. He had spurned her with sneers, and in jealousy had cast the gravest of reflections on her honour. And how grandly she had met the calumny! In an ecstasy at the recollection of her proud defiance, he leaned over and belaboured the rickshaw-boy lustily.

Then once again doubts and misgivings crowded in upon him. What was the secret of the writing-desk? Why should the Count risk so much to gain possession of it? And why should Krishna, the man he had made his friend and lifted out of comparative obscurity, play this deep, cunning game of diamond cut diamond in order to outwit the Count? Like a flash the Count's mysterious words in the garden recurred to him: "To-morrow at

midnight at your house." Were the two confederates, and was the house the meeting-place where they might confer on their night's work ?

The more he conjectured, the more baffling the mystery became. The idea occurred to him of appealing to Krishna, whose friendship he had not openly repudiated, whatever his intention might be. Then he remembered how repugnant the suggestion had been to her, and he fell again to conjecturing. Although she had dismissed him with bitter scorn, she was still the life-prize that he must fight for. She was worth the winning. Perhaps he had never realized that so fully as now. And Krishna, the man for whom he had brooked the ill-concealed gibes of his friends who hated "colour" with undying hate, held the key to this woman's love. He would go to Krishna and demand an explanation. If necessary, he would threaten him with every incident of the Agra Nook affair. He would go to him and——

Another light dawned upon him. He chided himself for his lack of perspicacity. Long residence in a plague-ridden, dried-up country, where the relentless, scorching sun hunts you out of every strip of shade the livelong day,

is sufficient to blunt the edge of any man's comprehension. Inactivity renders the brain sluggish, and even the totting up of chits at the month end becomes an intolerable fag. And so when the idea of playing the eaves-dropper struck the somewhat phlegmatic Graham, metaphorically he slapped himself on the back and, stimulated by this encouragement in his quest, he once more bestowed his attention and the end of his cane on the shoulders of the long-suffering rickshaw-boy.

If Graham could have foreseen only half the drama that was destined to be played in the house of Kuppuswamy that night, he would have been justified in thinking twice ere he assumed the rôle of investigator.

Two hours before midnight he was on his way to the hill-side bungalow. After passing through the native quarter, he dismissed the rickshaw and proceeded to walk the remainder of the distance. His long association with Krishna had familiarized him with every room in the old vakil's residence. Many a night had he sat with his friend at the feet of the philosopher, and tried to follow the trend of the old man's dreams of emancipation. Of Lakshmi he had seen but little, a fact for

which the customs of the country were wholly responsible.

He had often visited Krishna at night, and, in order not to disturb the native "boys," had reached the study in the way he intended to reach it that night. A low balcony ran around the upper storey of the bungalow. A man of Graham's height could touch it when standing on the veranda beneath. By drawing himself up a foot or so, he could clutch the stout bamboo framework and swing himself on to the flooring. Immediately above the veranda steps was Kuppuswamy's apartment, and to the left of this was a spare room, which Graham himself had often occupied. At the back of this was Krishna's laboratory, or rather his operating theatre, where he was wont to carry out anatomical experiments. Beyond this room, and divided from it by a thin partition of sliding panels, was Krishna's study.

Graham was not surprised to find the bungalow in darkness. Kuppuswamy's sleep commenced two hours after sundown, and age sat heavily on his ears. Graham knew his habits one by one, and felt secure from surprise from that quarter.

A heavy, oppressive silence rested on the

house. Not a single light flickered from any of the window-screens. The leaves of the trees above and around him were as motionless as the very trunks that gave them sap, and the cacophony created by the cicada seemed only to emphasize the silence. As he paused and looked up at the balcony a rustling in a dwarf mangrove on his right set his heart palpitating with uncanny fear, and the subsequent low, ominous hiss sent a cold shiver through him.

Once he reproached himself for stealing like a thief in the night into the house of a man whom he had been pleased to call friend. It had been more worthy of him to approach him in an open, courageous manner. But the recollection of Charlotte's anguish and Krishna's insincerity lent strength to his original resolve, and, removing his boots, he drew himself up and over the balcony. This feat accomplished, he was undecided what further course to pursue. There was no doubt in his mind that the incidents of the stolen document and the Count's whispered words in the garden were closely connected. If it were possible to overhear this midnight conference, the secret of Agra Nook would be a secret no longer. He took out his repeater : it was after eleven o'clock.

Treading lightly over the creaking boards of the balcony, he reached the window of the spare room. He had no difficulty in opening it; he never anticipated any, for his unorthodox method of entering the house at night-time had long ago received the sanction of Kuppuswamy, who was only too eager to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two students.

Crossing the room, he cautiously drew aside the panel which admitted him to the "bone-yard," as he had often dubbed the experimenting room. It was in total darkness. He put out his hand to feel his way to the opposite wall, and drew it back with a half-smothered exclamation when it touched the musty, odorous wrappings of a mummy. Fearful lest his cry should have betrayed him, he crouched down on the floor and listened intently. Not a sound! He crept forward, and stubbed his unprotected toe against an unwieldy fossil. Even in the moment of excruciating agony he remembered, with a bitter smile, that he and Krishna found that fossil during one of their geological rambles, and carried it uncomplainingly over three miles of heart-breaking undergrowth.

The injury to his foot proved a boon. It

reminded him that this particular fossil had been relegated to Krishna's skeleton cabinet or cupboard, which projected into the study and was fitted with a door on each side for the convenience of the student. The door on the laboratory side had been left wide open, and in the darkness Graham had wandered into the cupboard. He closed the door behind him and smiled grimly when he discovered that he had a companion of about his own height—a dumb, fleshless companion, who was standing bolt upright in one corner of the cupboard, with silver wire through his joints.

Placing his ear against the door that led into the study, he held his breath and listened. Everything was as quiet as the ghastly relic by his side. Gently he tried the door. It was locked! In his disappointment he barked his knuckles against the ribs of the skeleton. The murky blackness of the place was beginning to tell on his nerves. He groped about for the fossil, and sitting down on it, tried to compose himself. His thoughts were confused, rebellious. He endeavoured to comprehend the full nature of his self-imposed task and failed. First it was a comedy, in which he was playing the rôle of buffoon—the lights down, the mock

burglary, the skeleton at his side. Now he was paying court to her, holding her in his arms and breathing out his protestations in hot, burning whispers. And then it was drama—heavy, sordid drama, in which her honour was jeopardized.

He grew irritable. The awful silence of the place weighed down upon him. In his cramped position the heat was stifling. The nauseous, sickening, loathsome odour of musty bones and discarded medical instruments filled his nostrils. He was far from being a coward, although she had called him one, but this vigil would have tried the nerves of a mummy. A flicker above his head aroused him. He looked up hastily, and then shrank back with a low cry of horror. Two bright, gleaming eyes were staring at him out of the darkness. He put out his hand to ward off the awful thing, and his fingers touched the skeleton. Surely those gleaming eyeballs were in the sockets of the skull!

He felt the perspiration drip, drip, from his face on to his hands, yet he was cold as the dead. He looked again, and—and then he laughed softly at his fears.

On the top of the door, and within a few

inches of the skeleton's skull, were two ventilation holes, no larger than a good-sized marble. Someone had entered the study, and it was the light from their lamp that had streamed through the holes and alarmed the watcher. He could hear three distinct voices. By standing on the fossil it was possible to peer through the holes.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

SEATED at the table in the centre of the room were Krishna, Count Cimea, and two Hindus—judging by the white-ash caste-mark on their foreheads—whom Graham did not remember to have seen before. Like Krishna, they were in European clothes, and wore them with an ease and freedom that spoke of Western travel. Both had the appearance of intellectual men, and when they opened their lips, which was seldom, their English was perfect in every sense.

Krishna was in deep black, and his dark hair had been brushed carefully back from his high, protruding forehead. When he lay back in his chair, resting his chin on his delicate hands, the oil-lamp lighting up his features, he seemed to Graham to be lost in a profound study of his guests.

The Count was speaking, and in so low a tone that his words were almost inaudible to the listening Graham. The Hindus were leaning forward, but there was nothing in their countenances to betray their thoughts.

“What is our strength?” the Count was saying. “Has it not been tested? What are our aims? Need you ask? Out of the

grave of Feudalism a new power has risen—a people fired with an ambition that knows no bounds.”

“A country in its infancy.” The comment was Krishna’s, the voice cold and calculating.

The Count frowned.

“We do not deny it ; but can the blood of the old and effete be compared with that of strong, healthy youth ? ”

“Rash, headstrong youth, without experience to guide it.”

“We have the experience of the old,” the Count retorted. “The West has taunted us with being imitators. Perhaps the taunt is merited. To imitate is to admit one’s inferiority ; to imitate with discrimination is sometimes genius. What secret of the West remains to-day a mystery to the East ? The predominance of the West to-day is due, not to a higher standard of intelligence or civilization, nor to the strength they could muster in defence or attack. It is due to the whiteness of their skins, and the respect to that whiteness enforced by their fighting ancestors. Young ! Yes, we may be young, but we have been suckled by the children of the world’s sages, and we know our strength to an ounce.”

“ And, like the serpent of old, you would sting the breast that suckled you ? ”

The Count glanced appealingly at the Hindus, but they might have been graven images. Clearly they were content to abide by the word of Krishna. Whatever impression the Count's words had created on their minds, they took care not to show it.

“ The progress and educational advancement of the masses,” the Count went on, “ must always be a nation's right to lead. The rise of one nation and the submerging of another is a natural evolution, as it was before, and has been since the rise and fall of the Roman Empire.”

“ And India ? ” said Krishna impatiently. “ What bond of sympathy exists between you and us ? What greater hopes of emancipation can you hold out ? ”

“ The sympathy of the East to the East,” replied the Count. “ Can I say more ? ”

“ Disinterested sympathy is an anomaly,” said Krishna sharply. “ What benefits are likely to accrue to the three hundred millions of this country who are crying out for protection from the oppression of Europe—what benefits under a new Government, in return

for the actual and the undeveloped riches of this, our India ? ”

“ What benefits ? ” the Count echoed. “ Sympathy, that at present you only dream of ; the utter extinction of those degrading, demoralizing racial prejudices, that have cowed the spirit of your people and made them as base-born slaves ; the reconstitution of the Administration with the best brains of your people, mingled with the best of ours, at the head of affairs ; the——”

He stopped to mark the effect of his speech on his hearers. Still stolid as the wooden gods of their temples sat the Hindus.

“ Go on,” said Krishna in a dispassionate voice.

“ We should abolish the iniquitous taxes under which your toiling masses now groan. The encouragement of your own industries would make this possible, also a substantial reduction of expenditure on military enterprises, and a weeding out of the drones who are fattening on pensions which they do not deserve. Mass education on educational lines—think of it ! A free voice in the administration of the country ! In short, all the privileges of a free-born citizen for every native.”

With a flourish the Count ceased speaking, and Graham saw Krishna's brow contract and his eyes gleam.

"Do you come to us as an emissary of your Government?"

The Count hesitated. There was a terrible warning in those piercing eyes.

"I do not come as a member of the Cabinet, if that is what you mean," he said; "but in my country every man is a representative of the Government. Therein lies the secret of our strength."

"But what promises can you make with any prospect of their being fulfilled?"

"I said that I am not a member of the Cabinet, but I stand behind it, and my whispers carry far and sink deep. It is not politic for a Government's advisers to stand boldly out in the fierce light of public controversies. Under the cloak of retirement and apparent apathy he can render signal service."

"You mean that you are a spy?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Politeness is a trait worth the cultivating when you enter the arena of international politics."

"The present rulers of this country," said Krishna icily, "possess one trait that commends itself to friend and foe alike. They

do not wait to put on kid gloves when they desire to knock a man down, nor do they sip perfume before speaking their minds. You are a spy ? ”

The Count nodded affirmatively.

“ Now we understand each other,” said Krishna. “ There is no disgrace in espionage if you have the welfare of your country at heart. Rhandi here is a spy—so is his brother, on the left of him. So am I, for that matter.”

Graham saw a smile of contempt rest for a second on the brown, sallow face of the Count when allusion was made to the Hindus. Evidently it did not escape Krishna.

“ You have brought espionage to a fine art in your country,” he observed.

The Count bowed, and his protruding, gold-filled teeth showed themselves. “ Only the admittedly profound intellects are entrusted with the work,” he replied pompously. “ The boy-spies of the West are one of the institutions we did not copy.”

“ How long have you been in this country ? ”

“ A few months only.”

“ You could, if necessary, give us proof of your intellectual fitness ? ”

“ I think so.” He leaned back and drew in his breath between his teeth with a hissing sound.

“ Your secrets were less safe with the dead,” said Krishna encouragingly and with a wave of his hand.

The Count was silent for a few minutes. “ Yes,” he said at last, “ I can give you proof, and now.”

CHAPTER XV

MICE AND MEN

“ **T**HIS is a dangerous game in which we are engaged,” the Count continued. “ It would be unwise to show lack of confidence in each other. I think that I have said enough to convince you that our eyes have long been turned to this country. We are cognizant of the fact that others have watched its development and estimated its potentialities with as keen an interest. We believe, however, that if it came to a question of mere choice we should have your support. Unfortunately, it is not likely to be settled so easily. But we, like others, realized long ago that, when the crisis is reached, that Power which can depend on the sympathy of the ruled or misruled—which you please—will be the only Power capable of wresting it from the present holders. Am I right ? ”

“ Possibly,” said Krishna, a little wearily. “ But what other measures have you taken ? Give us some proof that beneath the veneer of friendship and amity which you profess for—for those who have suckled you there is the desire to succour us. Give us proof that this friendship for the West is not real.”

The Count half turned in his chair, and

Graham could scarcely suppress a cry when he saw him bring forth the familiar walking-stick and proceed calmly to unscrew the ferrule. Instinctively Graham glanced at Krishna, and he could have sworn that in the cruel, earnest eyes there flickered for a second the ghost of a smile.

"This," said the Count impressively, "is more than proof of our friendship." He drew out the sealed roll of foolscap, and, hardly glancing at it, passed it to Krishna, who toyed with it curiously, yet made no attempt to break the seal.

"You have in your hand complete plans of the most important fortifications of this country," said Count Cimea in a whisper. The Hindus leaned across the table, but Krishna waved them back.

"May I ask how you secured so precious a trophy?" he asked quietly.

"I obtained it last night," he replied, with a smile, "and in the house of a friend of yours."

"You mean Miss Bressane's residence?"

"Exactly, although the document, so far as my knowledge goes, is in no wise connected with that charming and most estimable lady."

A wave of relief swept over Graham.

“Before my arrival in India,” the Count went on, “I had heard of the gentleman who is known to you and his friends as Major Skew. Also I knew—so perfect and minute is our system of espionage—that Skew is the *nom de guerre* of Monsieur Pericard, once perhaps the cleverest and most astute officer attached to the French Secret Intelligence Department, but now in the pay of another European government. Need I specify which one? Pericard is believed to be the greatest expert in Europe on military defence works. Well, I made the acquaintance of the good man, or, rather, he made mine, and I found him to be one of the most delightful of companions, but shockingly communicative over a glass of his beloved wine. He and Miss Bressane are close friends”—he glanced at Krishna, and the leer on his face made Graham’s blood tingle—“I may say very close friends; but we know what these European officers are, eh?”

“We are not concerned with the morals of Monsieur Pericard,” said Krishna icily.

Count Cimea winced and pulled himself together. He was beginning to understand his man. “During our conversation,” he

continued, " which, needless to say, turned on defence works, he intimated that in that very house were the fruits of three years' diligent search. Now, I had heard of the Major's—er—friendship, shall we call it?—for our hostess of that evening, and my subordinates, who had been entrusted with the work of keeping an eye on the man, had often followed him to the bungalow. An unsuspected depository is a useful thing to a Secret Service officer. The confidence he placed in me was astonishing, even to me. A man's eyes invariably travel with his thoughts, and when he dropped the hint to which I have alluded—well, I reaped the fruits of the Major's three years' work. All is fair in love and war, my friends—a good motto, and one which the East deemed worthy of adoption from the West."

" And when the Major discovers his loss," said Krishna sceptically, " it will be comparatively easy to frustrate the designs of the thief. An anonymous letter to the Commander-in-Chief would be sufficient to cause the reconstruction of every fort. Have you thought of that contingency? "

" Thoroughness in all we undertake has made us what we are to-day," the Count replied. " In borrowing Pericard's original

drawings I left him a substitute. You will find in that roll of foolscap which you hold in your hand no fewer than ten plans. Pericard, also, will find ten in his, and a cursory glance will satisfy him that his secret is intact. For the sake of the country he serves, I trust they will not place too much reliance on Pericard's plans."

"Would you have any difficulty in identifying the original if the two were placed in your hands?"

"Not the slightest," replied the Count confidently. "You will observe that the crest on the grey seal of that roll is a broken stiletto—very faint, I admit. It was impossible in the time at my disposal to leave Pericard a replica. My own signet-ring—a snake's head—was pressed into service."

The Count lighted a cigarette, and, with a smile of triumph, leaned back in his chair and awaited Krishna's comment on the plans. "Well," he exclaimed presently, "why don't you examine them?"

"Because," said Krishna drily, "they are as worthless as the seal—a snake's head!" And he tossed the roll across the table. The Count sprang to his feet, glanced at the seal, and, with a groan, collapsed in his chair.

“ My dear Count ”—Krishna was smiling ironically—“ the eyes, as you say, invariably travel with the thoughts—a fact you should bear in mind when next you sit at the table of a clever woman.”

“ You mean——” the Count gasped.

“ I mean that the wits of the lady who entertained us last night are worth yours and Pericard’s together. But do not take your failure to heart. You are not the first man to be outwitted by a woman. Happily, the original from which you made your misleading copy is safe in my hands. Perhaps you would like to examine it.”

And, taking from his pocket another roll, he handed it to the astonished Count.

The man’s face was a study in amazement and chagrin.

“ We appreciate the bond of sympathy which exists between your people and ours,” Krishna went on caustically, “ and we shall welcome your undoubted intellectuality, which must of necessity arouse the masses of this country from their deplorable lethargy. At the same time, we are not prepared to tolerate condescension. That is one of our fundamental grievances at the present time. Emancipation must commence with due

recognition of the capabilities of our leaders. Unless that is vouchsafed, we shall repudiate you and seek to work out our own salvation."

"Which will be impossible," said the Count laconically. "Left to yourselves, this country would drip blood within a month. No power on earth could arrest the inevitable carnage when once started."

"That remains to be seen," replied Krishna quietly. "When the feeling of nationaliy is felt by Hindu and Mohammedan alike, faction-fights will die a natural death."

"We will not enter into a controversy," said the Count impatiently. "Let us discuss the object of our meeting."

Krishna bowed gravely. "We await your proposals," he said.

The Count lowered his voice. "Presuming that—that a certain Power, whose naval and military strength is admittedly very great, decided to strike a blow, not only on your behalf, but for the uplifting of the whole of the East, what assurance could you give that here in India the leaders of thought would tender their allegiance, or at least their sympathies and assistance?"

"Rhandi will answer you," said Krishna; and the Hindu on his right looked up at the Count.

"During the last twenty years," Rhandi commenced, with fervour, "the work of reformation has developed in an extraordinary degree. The aims and ideals of the leaders of thought have been made known from Bombay on the west to Calcutta on the east, from Allahabad to Madras. Despite the gagging of the native Press, our pamphlets have been disseminated as the wind disseminates the leaves in autumn. Need I say more?"

The Count appeared satisfied with the veiled assurance.

"And your proposals?" prompted Krishna.

The reply was almost inaudible to Graham, but he caught the words, "Money . . . sinews . . . war . . . forthcoming . . . we shall . . ."

The remainder of the sentence was a whisper, and the horrified eavesdropper saw Krishna's eyes close and his brow wrinkle, as though he would shut out some terrible apparition. The Count saw the movement, and took it for a sign of weakness and vacillation.

"Bah!" He laughed. "Your blood is too thin. Men who play in the game of international politics are not mothered by weaklings."

Krishna's brown fingers gripped the armrests of his chair, and a lurid light gleamed in his eyes.

"Nor do they jump hastily at conclusions," he retorted. "You shall judge the quality of our blood and the extent of our aims." With a rapid movement he removed part of his clothing and placed upon the table in front of him the red-hide belt.

Graham, watching from his observation hole, started violently. Where had he seen that thing before? And then, as in a dream, his mind went back to that night when he surprised Krishna in his study. He caught only a glimpse of it on that occasion, but he remembered Krishna's agitation and his wild, incoherent words.

The two Hindus exchanged meaning glances. The Count, obviously perplexed, stared at the curious-looking thing.

"Here," said Krishna solemnly, "is the life-work of some of the greatest intellects that India has ever known. They died as agitators, sedition-mongers; 'martyr' is written on their graves. One by one they gave up their lives. The last to go was one known to you; I mean Runga, the fakir."

The Hindus started and glanced inquiringly at the speaker.

“It is true,” he said, and there was a catch in his voice. “I learned it only yesterday. He died of a disease in prison while awaiting trial for sedition.” He drew from the folds of the belt one of the palm-leaves. “I will read for you what is written there,” he went on, rising and leaning over the shoulder of the Count. “I may tell you that, whatever action you may take, this scheme has been decided on, and will be carried out in its entirety.” Then he bent down and whispered rapidly in the other’s ear.

The situation was so tense that Graham could almost hear his heart throbbing. What was the secret of that innocent dried leaf, with its thousands of pin-pricks. As the Count listened, his face blanched and his chest heaved and fell as though moved by turbulent emotion. At last, unable to restrain himself further, he sprang to his feet.

“That! that!” he gasped, and sank quivering in his chair.

Krishna glanced at him with unconcealed contempt.

“‘Men who play in the game of international politics are not mothered by weaklings,’” he quoted.

For a while not another word was spoken.

Then the Count, pale, but composed, opened his lips. "You would require endless resources," he said, in a low, far-away voice, "for every man has his price. It is hardly necessary for me to say that we could not assist you financially—no, not to the extent of a single rupee."

"We are aware of your deplorable insolvency," said Krishna quickly; "who isn't? Happily, we have our own resources."

The Count's eyes opened wide in unfeigned astonishment. "I was not aware——" he began, but Krishna cut him short.

"Few persons are aware of it, but that does not alter the fact that here, in the country, is an available fund amounting, I have reason to believe, to millions of rupees—the garnered stores of several generations who had the good of their country at heart."

"I can scarcely credit what you say," Count Cimea faltered. Krishna's reply was to lay the second palm-leaf, with its cryptic message before him :

"For the realization of my dreams and the dreams of my immediate ancestors I bequeath the wealth of three generations. None can estimate its power. Before it men will fall like

the leaves in time of drought. He who would dream as I and mine have dreamed, let him read. . . . Smallest yet dearest. Watered by heaven. . . . Look west from the throne that faces the east. Beyond the shadow of the deodar at eventide it lies.

The Hindustani was translated to the Count, who rubbed his eyes and shifted uneasily in his chair. "I am at a loss to understand," he confessed. "The thing is terribly ambiguous."

"You are beginning to shake my faith in the intellectual standard of your people," said Krishna, with a significant glance at the silent Hindus.

"The clues are there, of course," retorted the Count petulantly, "but the brain that can interpret them unaided does not belong to this world. The treasure, if treasure there be, might have been buried at the bottom of the ocean with as great a chance of its being discovered. Can you throw any light upon it?"

"At present, no," said Krishna. "But tell me, Count, have you ever given up your mind seriously to the study of hypnotism and clairvoyance?"

“Our Admiralty considered the question only recently, and some of our officers are, I believe, devoting much attention and time to it.”

“We in India,” said Krishna dryly, “passed the incredulous stage some hundreds of years ago. But our sciences have ever been the ravings of a semi-barbaric race. The blindness of arrogance is a twofold affliction. We have suffered rebuffs in silence, knowing that one day the strength of our knowledge will overwhelm racial scruples. I will give you an instance of that arrogance. Doubtless the name of Sir Walter Broadshaw is familiar to your ears as being the name of the greatest physician in Europe. An ordinary case of hydrophobia was brought into the hospital in which one of our young men of Madras was junior house-surgeon. Sir Walter happened to be in the hospital when the case arrived, and ordered that the usual methods be adopted to lessen the agony of the patient and soothe his dying hours. The junior surgeon asked for and obtained permission to try a remedy of his own—a remedy which, I may tell you, is common enough out here. The patient was discharged, cured, from the hospital two days later. The junior surgeon

was hounded out of that hospital within a month."

Krishna stopped to light a cigarette, and the bitterness of his feelings was reflected in the trembling of the burning match in his fingers.

"And now," he continued, "you shall have ocular proof of 'the inferiority of our intellectual standard.' "

CHAPTER XVI

WILL-POWER

IT was with considerable trepidation that Graham Dennis watched Krishna rise from his chair and cross the floor. For the moment it seemed that his intention was to enter the laboratory. In that event discovery was inevitable. It was impossible to retreat. He was fully cognizant of the gravity of his position, the previous friendship of Krishna notwithstanding. Did he not hold in his hand the liberty of these four men ?

Krishna, his head bowed until his chin almost touched his chest, drew nearer, stopped a foot from the door, hesitated, and turning sharply, left the study by a door that Graham knew led into Lakshmi's apartment. The other three sat smoking in silence, and only the Count looked up when Krishna reappeared, accompanied by the daughter of Kuppu-swamy. She appeared to have been aroused from her slumber, as her wealth of black, glistening hair was tumbled about her shoulders, and she held her hand before her great wondering eyes to shield them from the glare of the oil-lamp. Krishna's arms were placed tenderly around her waist, and as he led her forward he stooped and

whispered something in her ear. Immediately she turned her young face to his, and her confidence in his protection was reflected in the long, lingering look of love and devotedness.

"These gentlemen are friends of mine, Lakshmi," he whispered, and there was a sweetness in his voice that none could have reconciled with the bitterness of the man of a moment before.

"Gentlemen"—he looked up at the others—"this is my foster-sister. There is no need to say more—to gentlemen." He placed a chair for her in such a position that Graham commanded a full view of her dark features.

"What devil's game is this?" he muttered to himself. "Surely they are not going to drag that child into their plotting?"

Krishna knelt at her knees, and took both her hands in his.

"Lakshmi," he said, in a deep, penetrating, yet not unkindly, voice, "do you remember the day that Runga, the fakir, brought the message from Mercara?"

She opened her lips to speak, then, with a little shake of her head, expressed her failure to understand.

"Ah yes, I know," he said quickly, recalling

his injunction and divining the reason of her silence ; “ but these are my friends and you may speak freely.”

“ I remember quite well,” she answered.

“ And you remember how he startled you when he crept near to you and stared into your eyes as I am doing now ? ”

“ Perfectly, Krishna.”

“ You were afraid, Lakshmi—afraid of the mists and the long sleep ? ”

She shivered slightly and closed her eyes.

“ Lakshmi ”—he drew her face down to his—“ you would not be afraid to sleep again if Krishna were by your side, holding your hands as he is doing now ? ”

“ Not if Krishna were near me,” she whispered back.

He rose to his feet and reached for the palm-leaf with the cryptic message. In a low monotone, and keeping his eyes fixed upon her face the while, he read the message, and replaced the leaf on the table. With a muttered apology he extinguished the lamp. Graham pressed his ear to the hole in the cabinet-door and listened. For a long time a death-like silence prevailed. Graham looked again, and, dark though it was, he could distinguish the forms of Krishna and

the girl. Once the kneeling man turned his head, and a strange pale blue light seemed to be streaming from his eyes.

"Krishna! Krishna!" It was like the plaintive note of a bird calling for its lost mate.

And deep and resonant came Krishna's voice in answer.

"Lakshmi! Lakshmi, I am by your side! Smallest, yet dearest . . . watered by heaven . . . look west from the throne that faces the east . . . beyond the shadow of the deodar."

Loud and cold and dispassionate her voice broke through the stillness of the darkened room.

"A long, low valley, with the hills closing in, and a strange people, who speak a strange tongue. The pilgrims are bathing in the river . . . their faces dark like mine . . . they speak . . . but . . . no, I cannot understand . . . the fort and the memsahibs at ball . . . see, it flies across the boundary wall . . . a boy and a man watch . . . a white sahib . . . ah, the boy is down . . . the palace of the Rajah . . . ancient . . . ruins . . . see the *nulla pambu* sleeps in the eaves . . . it watches . . . the palace of the Rajah Sinjhi . . . I see the name on the tomb . . . beyond . . . beyond . . . a short

man . . . creeping to the tomb . . . how dark it is ! . . . he turns to look at me . . . a strange face, not dark nor white . . . his hand is on the tomb, and . . . see . . . see . . . the *nulla pambu's* head . . . it strikes . . . Krishna ! . . . Krishna ! ”

There was a dreadful silence. Graham could hear the deep, laboured breathing of the men in the room. His own nerves were quivering. His very hands were wet with a cold perspiration. Then suddenly the lamp was relighted. He looked through the hole in the door. Krishna had taken Lakshmi in his arms, and was carrying her from the room. Graham saw her face for a second as they passed his hiding-place. Her eyes were closed as in death ; her cheeks were sunken.

He glanced at the other occupants of the room. The Hindus were huddled together and staring into the face of the Count, whose lips were as white as the roll of foolscap which still lay on the table. Fully ten minutes passed before Krishna returned. He was trembling, and his haggard face was the face of a man who had passed through a terrible ordeal. He was exhausted. When he resumed his seat his head dropped forward on the table,

and he remained in that position for some time. At last he looked up at the pallid countenance of Count Cimea. "Are you satisfied?" he whispered hoarsely.

"I did not understand," was the faltering reply.

"It was enough," said Krishna in a distant voice.

The four proceeded to discuss the plans, but their whispers were so low as to be inaudible to Graham, who had begun to wonder when the conference would draw to a close. Event had followed event with such startling rapidity that not for a moment had he reflected on the outcome so far as he could affect it. He had not the slightest idea what course to pursue when opportunity released him from his suffocating prison. Suddenly Krishna's voice rose above a whisper. His words struck a chill into the heart of Graham.

"Count," he was saying, "do you carry a revolver?" Graham saw the slanting eyes glitter as a tiny silver-plated weapon was passed across the table. Following Krishna's gaze, Graham looked across at the shuttered window. Was it a night-breeze that moved it, or——

Quick as lightning and to the great alarm

of the other three at the table, Krishna leaped to the shutter with the revolver at the level.

“Step down, sir,” Graham heard him command—“step quickly, or I fire.”

And into the room tumbled the burly form of Major Skew !

“Monsieur Pericard may be an excellent spy,” said Krishna sarcastically, “but I should advise him to eschew perfume when next he makes his toilet.”

For the first time in his life Graham admired the Major. In a moment of peril the arrogance of the man vanished and he was the cool, imperturbable officer who takes the chances of war with the quiet calm of a philosopher. With a revolver at his head and four pairs of eyes, in which rage and desperation commingled, glaring at him, he might from his composure have just stepped into his club. He wiped his moustache with his handkerchief—the aroma of the perfume on the white cambric lingered in Graham’s nostrils for years after—dusted the lapels of his coat and, with a quiet smile, remarked : “Gentlemen, it is a damned hot night—*n’est-ce pas ?*”

“Monsieur’s exertions have tired him,” said Krishna, with studied irony ; “perhaps

he will take a seat. We will not offend his dignity by searching him. No doubt he will place his weapon, which he carries in the left sleeve of his coat, on the table before him."

The Major smiled and threw down the weapon.

"Well?" he ejaculated, looking from one to another as a prisoner in the dock might look at the jury summoned to try him.

"You have heard most of our conversation?"

Krishna was sitting opposite the Frenchman, his fingers toying nervously with the Count's revolver. The three others were still on their feet, their glances divided between the two principals in the drama.

"You may be seated, gentlemen," Krishna said, and there was a ring in his voice that jarred on Graham's ears. "Monsieur Pericard is about to entertain us with an elucidation of his plans."

Pericard laughed lightly. "Your wit, young man, is even worse than your choice of acquaintances. Whew!" And he threw a glance of contempt at the Hindus and the Count. "A pretty trio!"

Count Cimea's face clouded. He strode toward the Frenchman, but Krishna motioned

him to a chair. Pericard half closed his eyes and, with a sneer twisting his mouth, surveyed the little squat figure. Then he turned again to meet Krishna's steady gaze.

"Well?" he jeered. "I await your pleasure."

Krishna's bright eyes streamed anger, but he recovered himself almost immediately.

"You seen impatient to die," he said coldly, adding, with a touch of unconscious admiration in his voice: "At least, cowardice is not one of your failings."

With mock politeness Pericard bowed his acknowledgment of the compliment.

"There is no time to waste in useless talk," whispered Count Cimea, glancing through the half-closed shutters at the sky, which was already paling before an early dawn.

Krishna shrugged his shoulders and, with a shade of annoyance, replied: "He is in your hands as much as in mine."

"And cold-blooded murder in the circumstances," chimed in Pericard, "would be an unpardonable indiscretion and a terrible reflection on such 'intellectuality.' Eh?"

Krishna put a period to the banter by suddenly turning down the light until it was a mere speck.

"Monsieur Pericard"—the voice made Graham shiver: it was the deep, solemn resonance of half an hour before, when Lakshmi was sitting where the Frenchman was sitting now—"Monsieur Pericard, we have no time for idle jest. Doubtless you realize the risks you have run in stealing upon us in the way you have?"

"Y-e-s!" It was the weak, faltering admission of the craven.

Through the semi-darkness Graham could discern the ungainly form of Pericard, shrinking rather than sitting in front of the slender, supple form of his questioner.

"You realize the danger your liberty would mean to four men who have the uplifting of a nation at heart?"

"I . . . do."

The dreary intonation struck fear into the heart of the listener without.

"You are a spy, monsieur, serving a country which is not your own."

"That is true . . . alas!"

"But you have loved your own country and once you would have died for it?"

"Would . . . have died . . . for . . . it," came the answer as from the clouds.

"And therefore you can sympathize with the aims of other men who love their country?"

"I . . . can . . . sympathize."

"Have I your sympathy now, monsieur?" Graham could see Krishna creeping nearer his victim. In his left hand he held the Frenchman's revolver; with his right he lightly touched the temples of the helpless, hypnotized man.

"You . . . have . . . my . . . sympathy!" The words came drip, drip, like the splashing of ice-cold water on a stone floor.

"Then listen to my voice. It is better to die by one's own hand than to be brutally assassinated by desperate men. You know the mangrove avenue on the right of Agra Nook?"

"I . . . know . . . the . . . avenue."

"You could walk there in half an hour. You will go at once."

"I . . . will go . . . at . . . once."

"Hold this revolver, monsieur." He took the unconscious man by the hand and pulled him to his feet. They crossed the floor together. Graham could hear the laboured

breathing of Krishna as the two shuffled past his hiding-place. They passed through the doorway and stumbled down the stairs. Graham heard the front door of the bungalow opened and slow, faltering steps die away in the distance. When Krishna returned to the others he was in the same exhausted condition as when he returned after conducting Lakshmi to her room. His thin lips were compressed, his cheeks sunken, and from his cavernous eyes poured again the pale blue light. He staggered like one newly recovered from stupor, but those other silent three made no attempt to come to his aid. For half an hour he sat with his face buried in his hands, then, with a cry in which fear and exultation were strangely mixed, he threw himself back in his chair and laughed and cried hysterically. One of the Hindus relighted the lamp and went over to him questioningly.

“It is well,” he muttered feebly. “My brain rocks; I am tired. Let us separate. Count, forgive me. Rhandi will communicate with you when the time is ripe.” He pointed to the open door. His head fell forward on the table again, and he appeared to sink immediately into a profound sleep.

Silently the others withdrew. Graham heard them walking down the garden path, and he was puzzling his brains to find some means of escape, when the figure at the table leaped to its feet, walked quickly to the open window, listened, and returned—returned to the door of the cupboard, and, in a voice that seemed to come from the grave, exclaimed :

“ You may come out now, Graham : they have gone ! ”

CHAPTER XVII

THE WARNING

HIS face livid, his limbs cramped, and a cold sweat standing out on his forehead, Graham Dennis crawled from the cupboard.

"God!" he gasped, shading his eyes from the light of the lamp with a hand that shook like a leaf, "what are you—man or devil?"

Krishna smiled and proceeded calmly to roll a cigarette.

"I confess I am at a loss to know myself," he said, showing his white, gleaming teeth, "since everyone seems imbued with the desire to intrude on my privacy and spy upon my movements."

"Your movements!" Graham was staring at him with a horrified expression on his face. "The movements of a devil must needs be watched!"

Another soft, careless laugh.

"Really, my dear Graham, you are as imaginative as the rest of your countrymen. But I am awaiting an explanation of this unwarrantable imposition on my friendship."

"Friendship! For Heaven's sake, don't

breathe the word—don't remind me that I descended from the dignity of a European and sacrificed the good opinion of my own people in order to befriend a—a damned nigger, who is more hateful and treacherous than a toad."

Krishna recoiled at the word "nigger" and raised a clenched hand; but Graham, whose nerves had been restrung by anger, continued his wild vituperation.

He was a big-framed man, with more than the average strength, despite the enervating climate. It was within his power to crush the slender, almost fragile, form before him, as he might have crushed a venomous toad in his path. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes, and for a second the courage of the other man seemed to desert him. But it was only for a second. The old smile of confidence returned. He blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling, and stepping back to his chair, seated himself and lazily crossed his legs.

"Won't you er—er—sit down?" he drawled pleasantly. "You must be fatigued after your long confinement. I feel quite callous for having allowed you to be so inconsiderate of your health."

"You pretend that you—you knew."

Astonishment was placing its foot on Graham's passion.

"I never pretend," was the quiet answer. "Luckily for you, I was aware of your presence in that cabinet, and was able, consequently, to keep the attention of the others diverted. They owe you no debt."

"And do you think that an Englishman would fear four—four——"

"Pray do not allow the arrogance of your race to overcome your discretion," said Krishna sharply. "We have a serious problem before us, and the sooner we commence to work out a solution the better for us."

"There is no problem to my mind," retorted Graham, ignoring the chair which the other pushed towards him. "Whatever friendship existed between us before to-night has gone, and can never be recalled. Before to-morrow night I——"

"Well, what will you have done?"

"What any Englishman would do if he had a spark of loyalty in him. Friendship! Why, I would sacrifice ten thousand such as you."

"You are boastful." The cynical tone cut like a lash, and, with a cry of rage, Graham leaped at the smiling face.

“Boastful, boastful, am I, you black reptile !”

“Sit down !” It was like the clink of steel on steel. The smiling face had changed in a flash. Two fierce, wild lights were shining out from a dark, scowling face. Graham stopped dead with his right arm upraised to strike.

“Don’t try your devil’s tricks on me,” he cried, but there was no defiance in his voice, and he retreated with his purpose unfulfilled.

“If we understand each other now, it will save time and—and unpleasantness,” said Krishna, in the stern tones of a barrister addressing a stubborn witness. “Your object in coming here was to obtain possession of those fortification plans about which you have heard so much to-night while playing the eavesdropper.”

Graham’s face flushed at the taunt.

“Oh, you will make an excellent eavesdropper in time,” Krishna laughed mockingly. “Your performance to-night was a distinct improvement on your Agra Nook feat.”

The man’s omniscience was beginning to shake the other’s confidence in himself.

“If I remember rightly,” Krishna went on, “it was your inability to control your surprise that betrayed you on the last occasion ?”

The feigned seriousness was ludicrous? "To-night you were nearer your quarry, and this time your partiality for a peculiar cigarette played you false. Russian, I think you said they were, and I remember your telling me that you had them specially imported for your consumption. The aroma lingers, Graham, and detail is an essential study in the education of a spy. Now, perhaps, you will tell me what you would have done with those plans had you been successful in—in stealing them. Yes, stealing is the word."

"And a word that is pretty familiar to you and your associates," sneered Graham.

"None of us is perfect, and we are all of us very susceptible and human where a woman is concerned."

"Breathe her name, defile it by so much as a syllable, and, by heavens, I'll beat the life out of you!" Graham was towering over him, his whole frame rocked by passion.

"Your excitement dulls your comprehension," said the imperturbable Krishna. "It is because I am desirous that she shall escape defilement, and, perhaps, because of the friendliness you once bore me, that I would bring you to reason, to a serious consideration of the present situation, instead of studying

my own safety and that of tens of thousands of others by silencing you once and for all."

"Oh, that would be easier than you imagine," he said sharply, as Graham's mouth turned in contempt. "I was not influenced by any of those finer feelings in the case of Major Skew, or, as we may now refer to him, Monsieur Pericard."

Perhaps he divined what was passing in Graham's mind, for he lowered his voice until it was no more than a whisper: "The Pericard danger is a danger no longer. You ought to feel grateful for the removal of so formidable a rival."

A sickening, sinking feeling came over Graham. "God, man!" he gasped, "are you the incarnation of the devil himself?"

"You have already asked that question," Krishna replied. "Unless you slept in your hiding-place — Englishmen are dreadfully somnolent—you must have heard our little discussion on one or two of the higher sciences."

An oath broke from Graham's lips. "If anything has happened to that man, if he has fallen a victim to the treachery of one of your heathenish associates, spy though he was, it will mean something more than transportation for you."

“ If I know anything of your Penal Code,” was the reply, “ suicide is a crime that is recorded against the person who attempts or commits it. If it came to a question of testimony, why, you yourself, Graham, could be called as a witness in my defence.”

“ Suicide ! ” Graham reeled and caught at a chair for support.

“ You are beginning to understand the position, I see. I thought you would. Now, to revert to an early question of mine, what are your intentions, assuming that you leave this house ? ”

Graham was on his feet again, and a hoarse laugh burst from his lips. “ Assuming that I leave this house ! ” he echoed ; but the look on the face of Krishna froze the words on his lips. He felt his way to the chair, as though seized with sudden faintness.

“ Are you going to answer my question ? ”

“ I have done so already,” he replied sullenly.

“ I expected that answer. Imbued with a deep sense of loyalty, you will approach the military authorities and seek to incriminate me and the three men you saw here to-night. The result, I fear, will surprise you. If an arrest is made, the culprit will be a woman ! ”

“ A woman ! Great heavens ! What do you mean ? ”

“ That undeniable proof will be forthcoming that the lady you know as Miss Charlotte Bressane is a spy, and that she and Monsieur Pericard were equally responsible for the procuring of the plans of ten of the most important defence works in this country. Now, my dear Graham, do you fully comprehend the situation ? ”

The words were as incisive as a knife-thrust. Graham's face was ashen ; his breath came in quick, painful jerks. “ You fiend ! ” he gasped. “ You inhuman devil ! To save your own miserable skin, you would sacrifice a woman—a woman as good and as pure as one of God's angels, despite the lying insinuations of the miscreant with whom you are plotting.”

Then a strange thing happened. Krishna's eyes were ablaze with a new fire. It seemed to leap in hungry jets from his very soul. At Graham's words he had drawn himself up to his full height ; his thin, long hands were pressed to his temples, and the lines of his face were working convulsively.

“ Injure her ! ” he cried ; “ injure her ! ” It was the wailing lament of a contrite man.

"I would rather renounce my gods." He reeled against the shuttered window, and his weight forced it open. The first red streak of dawn splashed the grey sky, and he stretched out his arms appealingly to it. "Injure her!" he moaned, and his body swayed in the pale light of the morning that enwrapped it. He seemed unconscious of Graham's presence—seemed obsessed with anguish that could not be assuaged. The first light breeze of day tossed the black hair from his high, protruding forehead, and revealed more clearly the frenzied working of the facial muscles.

Dumb, motionless, stupefied, Graham could only stand and watch—fascinated, transfixed by that weird, unnatural figure in black. Now it had dropped on its knees, the arms upraised in an attitude of supplication.

"The eyes of the dead will be upon thee!"

He breathed the words in a terror-stricken whisper.

"O father, the burden is too great! Let me live as other men. Help me, help me, Graham! Give her to me. Her! Her! . . . Oh, the fire . . . the burning, hateful fire . . . scorching . . . parching me! . . . Help me, Graham . . . help me!"

And with the long-drawn-out wail of an animal wounded unto death, he spun round, lunged forward, and fell with a crash at Graham's feet. It had all happened so quickly and without warning that Dennis was utterly incapable of doing more than raise his voice in alarm. His brain was in a wild kaleidoscopic whirl. His vision was blurred by a thousand extravagant fancies. He staggered to the door. He wanted air—fresh, wholesome air—to suck down deep into his lungs and inflate his aching chest, on which the weight of a mountain seemed to be resting. He was conscious of the pattering of slippered feet along the balcony of the bungalow, of the decrepit form of Kuppuswamy, clad in his dhoti, bending over the dark, prostrate figure on the floor. And he heard, though it came as a wind-whisper singing and sighing from the distance: "The doctor, Lakshmi . . . the brain." Then he reached the door, threw it wide open, and ran.

He seemed to have been running for hours. The sun was beating straight down on his unprotected head. And yet he was cold—dead cold. He felt he must keep on, on, on, or he would never reach his destination. And what

his destination was he could not for the life of him have said. He headed away from the city like a fugitive hunted by the hounds. He plunged into every scrub and plantation that would hide him from the curious, tore through copse and undergrowth, heedless of bleeding hands and tattered clothes. Ryots in their rice-paddies looked up and jeered. Only another white sahib in his cups ! Still on he pressed, until away in the distance Agra Nook appeared as a tiny white speck on a brown hill-side. And as he saw it he cried and whined, like a hound that has struck the trail afresh. Blood streamed down his face and almost blinded him ; blood squelched from the toes of his broken boots ; but he kept on with a strength that was not his own. He reached the mangrove avenue. The house lay beyond, fifty yards or so, and again he whined, and spat out the blood that had trickled in at the corners of his open mouth. And then he stumbled, and fell with a curse across a body lying in his path. He laughed with the glee of a child that has found the long-lost toy. And he dragged himself on his knees to the face of the Thing, and brushed the wet hair back from the cold forehead ; laughed as he held his fingers up before his bloodshot eyes

and watched the red drops gather and fall from the tips—laughed because he knew whose body it was; laughed because his brain was tottering on the verge of insanity.

And of a sudden a new strength came to him, like a fitful breeze on a dead calm Eastern sea. He felt for the hand of the cold Thing lying there, and stroked the barrel of the Service revolver. From that his fingers travelled to the temple, and groped and groped among the bloody hair until they found the hole through which the life-blood had oozed. Then, with hands that dripped red, he turned the body over and clutched at the left hand, that had been doubled up underneath in the fall. With the eagerness of a ravenous beast he fastened on the blood-smeared envelope, and steadied his brain for a second that he might read :

“ Deliver to my sister, Charlotte Bressane, Agra Nook.”

His sister ! He shrieked the words, and then, before he knew what he had done, the envelope was opened and a roll of thin rice-paper was crinkling in his hands. Ten sheets in all. He actually counted them, played with them, smeared them with his red fingers,

and then he read the note that was pinned on the last folio :

“ Convey to the Minister for War without delay, and acquaint with details of plan and theft which occurred as he predicted. Dummy safely in hands of native agitators who are working in collusion with Neon.—F. P.”

And so he had outwitted them, after all ! They had taken the bait that he had laid with so much cunning. Including the Count's, there were three sets of plans of the forts in existence. Three ! No, only two : for, with the ferocity of a beast, Graham was tearing to pieces the only valuable set. And his work done, his frenzy past, he sank down by the side of the dead in blissful unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WOMAN'S VIGIL

SHE was alone with her dead !

They had been found together, Graham Dennis and Pericard, and the two privates of the 53rd Foot who came upon the two had told a strange story. Pericard's dead fingers still clutched his revolver, but it was obvious even to the lay minds of the soldiers that the wound in the temple was self-inflicted. The hair in the immediate vicinity of the wound was scorched and blackened by the powder. The other man, when aroused from his death-like sleep, had laughed in their faces and babbled of forts and blood-red eyes that were following him everywhere. And he had crept to the side of the dead man, crying : " Her brother—Charlotte Bressane's brother ! " But when they spoke to him and attempted to question him, his vacant eyes reflected the blankness of his mind. They brought the dead to Agra Nook, advised by a passing rickshaw-boy, who with inexplicable intelligence carried in his head an unwritten directory of the city. Graham had been taken home, and, while the doctors never doubted the main issue, they feared for his reason.

Many and extravagant were the conjectures,

but when it was learned that Miss Bressane had admitted the relationship babbled of by the stricken Graham, they were narrowed down to this : Graham, who was known to be infatuated of Miss Bressane, had met the Major on his way to Agra Nook. Jealousy had suggested only one reason why the man should be visiting the bungalow at that time of night, and angry words had been followed by blows. The Major, being the stronger of the two, had stunned Graham, and, in a moment of mad fear that he had killed him, had drawn his revolver upon himself. But why had this man and this woman hidden their relationship ? The question was the remnant of a mystery left the tea-table gossips.

And she was alone with her dead.

They had tendered their condolences, and she had thanked them. Their pity, no matter how insincere, had lightened the blow. They had gone away wondering. It was difficult to understand her brave, determined smile in the face of overwhelming grief. Weakness, they had been taught, was always a woman's greatest strength.

The sunshine crept through the interstices of the window-screens and touched his dead

face. She was holding a lifeless hand and watching with fearless eyes. None could say how great her grief. She seemed determined that no one should fathom her feelings. Their sympathy might have loosened her tongue. The house "boys" moved about with quiet tread, their eyes wide open and terror-stricken. Their natural fear in the presence of death was secondary to the awe which her white face inspired. She had sat there for hours, when the head "boy" whispered from the doorway that another mourner had called. She merely inclined her head and turned her eyes again upon her clay. Nor did she move when the soft pad of bare feet and the gentle rustle of native silk broke in upon her silent grief; only when a small dark hand was placed tremblingly in hers did she raise her eyes and gaze in wonder at the fragile figure at her knees.

"The white memsahib sorrows. Can Lakshmi share her grief?" It was like the soft tolling of a mellow temple bell, the sigh of a summer wind in the leaves of a sleeping palm.

"Who are you, child?" she asked.

"Lakshmi, memsahib, the daughter of Kuppuswamy, the vakil. We know of you

through our Krishna, and when we heard of your sorrow my father sent me to sorrow with you, if—if my colour does not matter.”

The woman lowered her white face until her lips touched the soft dark brow.

“We have a grief, also,” Lakshmi said, “but not so deep as . . . yours . . . as yours.” She had risen from her knees and was peering, fearfully, over the side of the coffin. “O—h!” She started back with a low cry of surprise. “He . . . he” — she was pointing at the dead face—“he was your——”

“My brother, child. Why do you start so? Are you afraid of the dead?”

“Afraid of the dead? No; but he—he knew our Krishna. He came last night. I saw him through the panel—he and the short sahib with the narrow eyes, and the two Hindus.”

“Yes, Lakshmi; go on.”

Charlotte’s voice and eyes betrayed her agitation, and Lakshmi, with native caution, shook her head.

“That is all,” she said quickly. “They talked long, and it was nearly dawn when memsahib’s brother left.”

“Did he go alone, Lakshmi?”

"Yes, alone," she answered, the look of perplexity deepening on the woman's face.

"And now Krishna has gone, memsahib. We know not where, and we are in sorrow, as you are."

"When did he go?"

She seemed to be nearing a solution of the mystery of the avenue.

"Some hours after the white sahib—many hours. We found him with his friend, Dennis sahib. You know him? He loves you. I have heard Krishna say so in his sleep. We found him on the floor with the wrinkles of pain on his face. And Dennis sahib was mad with terror. My father carried Krishna to his room, and I sat by his side, as you sit by the side of your dead. And when he awoke he called for water—he said his brain was burning—and when I returned with it he had gone."

"Gone, Lakshmi?"

She nodded her head, and two big scalding tears splashed down from her brown cheeks on to Charlotte's hand.

"But he will return, child?"

"No," she said slowly; "I don't think that he will ever return, for Krishna

is not as he used to be. He loves a white memsahib ! ”

“ A white woman ! ”

Charlotte caught the girl’s hand.

“ And you, Lakshmi—you——”

“ We are betrothed,” she said simply ; and a great glad light illumined her face, to be succeeded a moment later by intense sadness. “ But he loves a white memsahib,” she repeated, “ and that can never be.”

“ Why ? ”

It was an idle question, for Charlotte’s thoughts had gone off at a tangent. She was wondering what had happened at Kuppu-swamy’s house the night before.

“ Why ? ” Lakshmi echoed. “ Is it not written, memsahib, that such a marriage is against the will of the gods ? He would be an outcast. His father, his mother, his brother, and his sister may not look upon his face again. Nay, more : they would disclaim him and shun him as they shun the leper. Is it not so written, memsahib ? He must creep away out into the jungle to die, he and she, for the hand of all would be raised against him and her. . . . Creep . . . away . . . to die.”

“ And you would shun him, little woman ? ”

“ I, Lakshmi ! ” The girl looked up in amazement. “ We are betrothed,” she said again.

“ But if he went away with—with this white woman ? ”

“ She could not keep him after death, and death is longer than life, memsahib.”

Charlotte stooped and kissed the girl again.

“ He may return,” she said, “ and there may be no white memsahib with him.”

“ You know where he is ? ”

Lakshmi had seized her hands with a soft cry of expectation.

“ I, child ? How should I know where he is ? ”

And the answer chilled her.

“ Because you are the white memsahib he loves. You—yes, you ; for I have heard him call your name in the dead of night when none was near him but I. Memsahib, you will be good to him, my Krishna, and give him back to me after death ? Say you will, memsahib, and I will wait—yes, wait yonder with my father until he shall have returned.”

Tears were streaming down the girl's face, and the brown fingers tightened round the white hands of the wondering, amazed woman.

"It is not I that he loves, child." Her voice was stern, but there was a frightened look on her face. "That is impossible. Never speak like that again. You may go back to your father and rest in peace."

Lakshmi stared incredulously at the white, startled face. It was incomprehensible to her that Krishna could not inspire this woman with love for him. She rose to her feet, bowed reverently to the dead, and, stooping low, kissed the white hand of the woman.

Night came and found Charlotte wandering restlessly from room to room. The mystery of the mangrove avenue, so easily solved by those whom it least concerned, robbed her of the tears that in her bereavement might have soothed. The work she had shared with the man who had died had steeled her nerves against many possibilities that would have tried the strength of a man; but with the horror of inscrutable mystery added to death her plight was pitiable indeed.

Although she did not suspect it, Pericard had not taken her fully into his confidence. A spy never trusts implicitly. The plans which they had locked up in the writing-desk she believed to be those for which they had

plotted and risked so much. He had warned her of his intention to bait the Neon Count, whose real mission in India he had suspected from the first. It was her suggestion that she should shadow him, and she had laughed heartily the next day when she told Pericard how she had presented the Count with his own drawings. Then came the discovery that another thief dwelt in the house, and Pericard had allowed her to weep bitter tears of disappointment because the plans which she had returned to the desk had disappeared.

When Pericard left her on the night that proved his last, he intimated that the object of a secret journey which he had in view was the recovery of the lost plans. Perhaps he had learned of the midnight meeting in Kuppuswamy's house in the same way that Graham had learned of it, and instinct warned him of its significance.

And they had brought his dead body home to her. Only Graham Dennis was likely to throw any light on the mystery. Many a time that day had her head "boy" crossed the city to inquire about Graham sahib's condition, but the message was always the same, "Still unconscious," and hope was being slowly driven from her heart.

Poor Grahamy boy! She had heard his mother call him thus, and she found herself mechanically repeating the words as she wandered to and fro. The recollection of his pained look when she whipped him with her angry words brought a lump into her throat. He was not the first man who had sought to share her life, but none had crept so closely to her heart as Graham—big, muscular, ingenuous Graham, who knew not nor cared for subterfuge even in the art of love-making.

It was a typical Eastern night—a bright, clear sky, with a silver moon hanging like a pendant from its breast. The “boy” came in with the lighted lamps, but she preferred the calm of darkness, and he took them away again. She threw open the window of the room and watched the fireflies playing hide-and-seek in the shrubbery. A deep stillness was broken only by the fitful scream of the cicada. For the first time, a sense of her loneliness overwhelmed her—an awesome, dreary, interminable loneliness. It was hot and sultry in the room, for she had dispensed with the punka-wāla, and yet she shivered as she sat by the open window. She rose with the intention of throwing a light cashmere shawl about her shoulders. Then she

remembered that it was in that other room where he lay. She walked to the door, stopped with her hand on the knob and hesitated. It was dark in there, and . . . and she trembled. The drowsy silence was the silence of the grave !

Slowly, fearfully, she opened the door and peered in. Through the window-screen the moonlight stretched like a long white stream, and bathed the face of the dead in its splendour. He seemed to be smiling at her fears as she stood there on the threshold, her heart beating rapidly with a terror she had never before known. The lids of the eyes had not been quite closed in the last sleep, and the moonlight, intensifying the pallor of the cheeks, threw into relief the dark lashes and the glazed, partially concealed pupils. In her trepidation her fancy seemed to trick her. It was only a wisp of cloud passing across the moon that made those lashes flicker. With a half-suppressed cry she stretched out her hand to touch the bell. Her courage had failed her. Then she remembered that in craven terror the house " boys " had begged permission to sleep the night in their own homes in the native quarter of the city.

Once more the wave of loneliness engulfed

her, and she stood petrified, gazing at the dead and its white, ghostly drapery. And as she stood there a bat flew against the window, and with a cry of fear she turned back to the dining-room.

How dark it was ! And silent !

The moon had hidden itself behind a cloud-bank. She could not see across the room. She would light the lamp, or, better still, she would steal quietly away to her room and tempt sleep. And . . .

Heavens ! What was that staring at her from out of the darkness on the other side of the room ? Two deep red specks of living fire ! Two eyes that moved, and . . . and . . . were coming towards her ! She could not speak nor stir. Her tongue might have been strung back in her throat. Her limbs were cold and paralysed.

They came nearer ! She saw the face, dark as the night itself, and haggard and wrinkled, and the cheeks sagging as the lips moved in unintelligible sounds. She crouched back against the wall, and feebly raised her hands to ward it off.

“ Charlotte ! ”

A deep, unnatural voice—the very walls reverberated,

“ You ! ” she gasped in terror—“ you, Krishna ! ”

“ Yes, Charlotte—Krishna.”

“ What do you seek in this house ? ”

Her face was livid. Lakshmi's words were ringing in her ears : “ He loves a white memsahib.”

“ What do I seek ? ” The low, forced laugh jarred on her nerves as the clanging of a broken bell. “ I have come to seek you, Charlotte. And I have found you—alone ! You are not afraid of me, Charlotte—not afraid of Krishna. Come nearer.”

She shrank away.

“ No, you must go. You have no right to intrude upon my privacy, upon the dead.”

“ The dead ! ” he echoed bitterly—“ the dead cannot feel nor resent.”

“ If you have no respect for my feelings, at least respect the dead.”

Her voice was steadier ; her courage in the face of the unexpected was returning. He was close to her now—so close that she could feel his hot breath on her face. His clothes were torn and bedraggled as though he had been hunted from place to place, and there were splashes of mud on his cheeks and hands.

"If you are a man, you will leave my house at once." She put out her hands to keep him at bay. "Have you not a spark of respect for me?"

"Respect!" He stepped back from her and lurched against the piano, still keeping his glowing eyes fixed upon her. "Respect! respect!" he repeated. "That is not the word. It is because I love you, Charlotte, that I have come here to-night. Love! love! Don't you understand? Have you not understood all along—from the very first night that I met you . . . your words, your eyes, your smiles, the pressure of your white fingers on mine? Don't you remember? See, it is all burned in here, branded on my brain with hot, searing irons. I had not lived till then. But how I have lived since!"

His vehemence drove the blood from her heart. Her lips moved in a prayer.

"You must be mad to talk like this," she faltered, pointing to the open window. "Go before you are prevented. Go and—and I will forgive you. Go and leave me with my dead brother."

"Go!" He laughed again—that harsh jangling laugh. "Yes, I will go if you will come with me." He sprang towards her

again and seized her white wrists. "Charlotte, you must come. I am going to save you!"

"Save me?"

"Yes, save you from them. I know them, Charlotte, know the mockery of their so-called justice. They will send you away—banish you to one of their hell-holes on the Andaman Islands. There are thousands there. I know. Thousands of men and women whose only crime was love of their country. They are dying in hundreds daily—dying of sickening, loathsome diseases that creep upon them in a single night. And their crime, remember, was only love. Yours—yours——"

"Well?"

Her head was thrown back defiantly. She was measuring him with scornful eye, as one might measure a thing one hated and despised. Her withering contempt checked the flow of words, but her grandeur of spirit thrilled him.

"Well?"

She took a step towards him.

"Need I remind you?"

She had awed him. He was wavering. The victory strengthened her.

"Who are you to remind me of anything? Who are you but a pampered native who

aspires to a false position, who in the presence of misguided friends—who would kill you where you stand if they were here—apes the gentleman ; a native tarred with a smattering of education, and who talks of ideals and ambition with the conceit of a trinketed savage ; a native whose manliness extends to the forcible intrusion on a woman's loneliness and grief ? Go back, you cur ! back to the kennel from which you have broken loose, or, weak woman that I am, I'll—I'll——”

Her frenzied eyes sought a weapon. An old riding-whip hung from the frame of a sporting print immediately above her head. With the quickness of a cat she seized it, and, before he could divine her intention, before he could spring back out of her reach, she had brought the stock down with a stinging cut across his face ; then, with a wail of despair, she reeled against the wall and awaited his retaliation.

The seconds that followed seemed like long-drawn-out years. Through the gloom she could see his burning eyes moving restlessly in their sockets, as though he were lashing himself into a rage. She prayed for strength to shout aloud for help, but even

in her terror she realized the futility of raising her voice. Who could hear her on that lonely hill-side ?

The white moon, freed of the clouds, poured into the room. Krishna had seated himself at the piano. His left elbow rested on the open keyboard and supported his head. She was unable to suppress a cry when she saw his wild, disfigured face. He was smiling, actually smiling at her, and sadness and bitterness were strangely blended in that smile. The blow she had struck him had brought the blood. It trickled in a thin dark stream, scarcely discernible on the dark skin, down his right cheek and on to his mud-stained linen shirt-front. His passion seemed to have died down. He was gazing at her, pityingly yet pleadingly. His voice was calm and wonderfully modulated when he spoke again.

"Only a woman such as you could serve a Government," he said admiringly. "Oh, if India could breed such women, she had never fallen !"

"Could serve——" She repeated the words in a frightened whisper.

"As a spy," he added coldly. "Even they would hesitate to confine such a spirit within the four walls of a noisome cell."

“ A cell ! ”

“ Or in the fever marshes of their damnable penal settlements.”

She was breathing hard and her hands were pressed to her temples. Then the foolishness of her fears and the ludicrous way in which she was allowing him to play upon them revived her contempt. He seemed to know what was passing in her mind.

“ Yes,” he muttered bitterly, “ they would give you a trial in time of peace, but their trials are more iniquitous than the rifle-shot in time of war.”

“ Proof, proof ! ” she sneered, with feminine indiscretion. It was the opening for which he had been fencing.

“ Only this,” he replied slowly, drawing from a pocket of his bramble-torn coat a roll of paper. “ Only this,” he repeated, tapping it gently on his knee—“ detailed plans of ten impregnable forts, drawn up and carefully revised by Charlotte Bressane and Henri Pericard.”

She could not utter a word—could only crouch and stare at the man and the paper in his hand. He realized the advantage gained. There were sobs in his voice as he went on in a

whisper that might not have been intended for her ears.

"It would kill her—it would kill her! A month in those fever-ridden swamps would kill her."

He rose and took her by the hand. She offered no resistance; she was dazed, stupefied.

"It would kill you, Charlotte," he breathed in her ear. "Don't you realize the horror of it? But we can cheat them, you and I. Charlotte, I want you, desire you more than anything else the world may hold. Do you hear me, Charlotte? I want your white face and your white, warm arms. I want your love—your deep, abiding love. And we will creep away in the darkness—away into the mountains of Coorg; thither none can track us to our bridal feast. All that you desire, Charlotte, shall be yours for the asking, for the garnered stores of generations are to my hands. You shall be my queen, Charlotte—do you hear?—my queen, and I will sacrifice everything—dreams, ambitions, friends—to your love."

His arms were about her; his hot breath was steaming her face and blinding her. Controlled by his passion, he was crushing her to him.

With a despairing cry, she wrenched herself free and leaped at the window. He intercepted her, forced her back, and answered her cry of "Help me, Graham!" with a low, bitter laugh.

"He! He help you! You call upon him!"

His eyes were gleaming anew. He sprang upon her and caught the wrists of her upraised arms.

"He could not give you half the love that I shall give you. You could never give him half the love that you shall give me now."

She was panting, weak, and exhausted, and when he lifted her from the floor on which she had sunk, she hung a limp dead weight in his arms.

"Come," he laughed, "once you asked me to play for you. I fulfil my promise to-night. And you shall laugh with me—yes, and you shall kiss—kiss me with those red lips of yours as you never could kiss him."

He drew her across the floor to the open piano, and placed her on a chair in such a position that her face was turned to his.

He touched the keys lightly, softly, and they responded to the touch as bird to bird in

the early morn. From the moment he struck the first note a change came over him. All around was impenetrable darkness, save when the moon threw fitful beams through the window, but a weird blue light that held her spell-bound illumined his face. Never for an instant did he turn his eyes from her to the ivory keys, but he inclined his head to the instrument, and rocked and swayed in sympathy with the sweet cadences. Gently, caressingly, his long brown fingers, spattered from the nails to the wrist with blood but newly dried, moved across the keyboard ; and as they moved they seemed to be beckoning to her, calling to her through the voice of the music, to creep into their embrace. Once she attempted to rise, to break away from the invisible chain that bound her to the chair, to shriek in wild protestation against this violation of the sleep of the dead. His mocking laughter forced her back. She covered her face with her hands to shut out the scene, but he was irresistible, and her eyes met his again. She twisted her fingers in her hair and thrust them in her ears, but the more she strove against it the more compelling the melody. It floated about her with the sweet fragrance of incense ; it

numbed her body ; it blinded her vision ; it deadened every sense but that which she sought to sacrifice.

It played itself into dreams—wild, extravagant dreams—and wove her fancy into them. Now it was the dawn. She saw the sombre mantle of night drawn aside, and in the east a splash of gold and amber threw defiance at the paling stars. She heard the freshening breeze stirring the drowsy leaves of the giant palm, and felt its cold, damp kiss on her colder brow. A bird woke up in a distant lime and called sleepily to its mate in a neighbouring deodar. She heard the answering “tee-wit,” saw the sheen of its feathers as it flew into the golden flood of the sun, and marked the majestic throw of its pinions as it circled above the lime.

Swiftly, wonderfully, silently, the night shadows died away before the glorious day-break. On the hill-side the flowers opened their petals, and the breeze brought her their first rich offerings of the dewy morn.

He played on.

He might have been unconscious of her presence, but she feared to move or turn away her eyes.

It was raining. She could hear the “seesh !

seesh ! ” on the broad leaves of the traveller-palms in the garden. The sky grew dark as night and the lightning flashed. The very heavens seemed to open with a roar, and a deluge fell upon the land. She could hear the boom of the swollen, swirling river ; the hoarse cries of the terrified mahouts as they forced the trumpeting elephants across the ford, and the loud howling of the living things in the water—beasts of the jungle and oxen that had been swept into the turbulent flood. And the wind and the rain whipped the bosom of the river into a milk-white foam, and amid its whiteness she saw the dark trunk of a deodar, torn from its roots in the hill-side, and on that trunk the white face of a man turned to her for help. She leaned forward and scanned the features, and, with a cry of dismay, she recognized Graham. She could see his body now, all bruised and bleeding where it had been struck by the swirling boulders. She called to him to cling with all his might, for the storm was abating ; but even as she called, another form crept stealthily along the splintered bark and dragged him down into the river’s heart.

The scene changed to one of Eastern splendour. She was a Queen, and sat on a throne

of gold and silver that reflected the sun, and rubies that shimmered like drops of human blood. Fountains splashed at her feet, and the air was heavy and pregnant with sickly, sensuous perfume. And soft-eyed daughters of old India lay back among their cushions at her feet, and sang to her ballads of Eastern romance, and threw jasmine buds in her face. She laughed with them—a soft, seductive, rippling laugh, that floated up among the overhanging leaves and mingled with the melody of a myriad birds. Then the girls threw aside their silken cushions, and four made music through their bamboo flutes, while the others danced and sang in the shadow of the trees. They waved their hands to her to descend from the throne and join them, and with trembling feet—for she envied them their lightness—she crept down. And scarce had she reached the ground, when out of the glade a man came forth to greet her. He did not speak, just opened his arms, and there was a tenderness in his eyes that drew her to him, soul to soul.

He wound his arms around her and loosened her hair, so that the breeze flung it, wild and rebellious, about her bare white shoulders ;

and as he held her thus she raised her eyes, and his lips met hers in a warm, clinging embrace. Her blood tingled with a wild, passionate, unrestrained delight. He was drawing the very breath out of her, but it was sweeter to die unsevered than to live without such love.

“Again!” and “Again!” and “Again!” he cried, tearing himself from her only to fetch breath, and again, and again, and again she kissed him with a passion that left her exhausted. And——

Suddenly the music ceased, and with a shriek she regained her mental balance. Krishna was still seated at the piano, but her arms were around his neck, her lips newly plucked from his!

She screamed in terror, but he held her a prisoner, kissing her lips, her eyes, her neck, with a ferocity that wrung from her a cry for death.

“Death! No, not death,” he answered hoarsely, “but life—young, strong, full-blooded life! You are mine, Charlotte—mine to hold and keep—mine by virtue of your kisses. Death! No! We are not old and musty as parchment, but strong with a vigour that life can give but once.”

His words poured forth in a wild, ungovernable torrent.

“ God help me ! ” she moaned. “ Who or what are you ? ”

“ Yours, Charlotte,” he cried exultingly — “ yours, only yours, and you are mine ! ”

Her strength was leaving her and her brain throbbed. Held in his steel-like arms, she glanced helplessly round the room. With a quick movement she eluded him and sprang for the door, and, like a beast balked of its prey, he sprang after her. The very hoplessness of her chance of escape gave her strength. A painted urn was standing on a small bamboo table near the door. She grasped it by the neck, and as he came up to her she dashed it with all her force in his face.

Before he could recover himself she had opened the door and found sanctuary in the room of the dead. Maddened by pain, he followed. She was crouching by the side of the coffin, clinging for protection to a cold white hand.

“ Stop ! ” she cried in an awful whisper. “ You dare not defy the dead ! ”

For a moment he stood on the threshold, wavering ; then, clear and bold and deep,

there came to their ears the tolling of a temple bell.

“ One ! . . . Two ! . . . Three ! . . . Four !
. . . Five ! . . . Six ! . . . Seven ! ”

He counted each stroke, and as he counted the fire left his eyes and he shook with fear.

“ Their Voice ! Their voice ! ” he cried, and, turning, fled.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

CAPTAIN RANDOLPH FORTESCUE, commanding Fort T——, was a robust man of forty-five, who had confounded the predictions of his home friends by surviving the ordeal of ten years' service in India without a scratch being recorded against his bill of health or his character. Not a single night of fever had been chalked up to his name, and not a single line of type in the English newspapers had disturbed his peace of mind. What his conscience suffered from reading between the lines he was not fool enough to say.

His luck was the despair of brother-officers, to whom the law list was more familiar than the army list. And yet his sovereign remedies against all ills were simple enough—whisky for germs, and—er—indifference in other directions. So far as the duties of his profession were concerned, he was inclined to be stolid, and he actually fattened on head-quarter bickerings that would have driven other officers to their wits' end. The latest scare, however, had spolt a good cheroot and flattened an uncommonly strong whisky. A despatch from the Commander-

in-Chief threatened to disturb his equanimity, and he had sent an orderly to his friend Captain Grierson, of the Royals, requesting the pleasure of his company for an hour.

Grierson, six or seven years his junior, was one of those gay, handsome fellows whose good looks are invariably the cause of their being drafted abroad. He reached the fort with a countenance as rueful as that of a "chitty" who had just witnessed the departure of a tramp steamer with one of his best clients on board. Fortescue smiled knowingly, and pushed the soda across the table.

"Who is it this time?" he chuckled, forgetting his own troubles in his amusement at the other's obvious discomfiture.

"You're awfully cheerful," Grierson growled. "Pity your sins don't find you out. You'd know the meaning of sympathy then."

"Ah, that's the worst of you fellows," Fortescue laughed. "You fool about with a mine, like a lot of schoolboys with a tin of powder and a match, and then you expect a battalion to go down on its knees and offer up prayers for you."

"We're not all so devilishly cute as you, 'Forty.' Perhaps it's a good thing for the

women that we're not. Reduce—er—indiscretion to a fine art, and what's going to happen to the world ? ”

“ Judging from your doleful appearance, you haven't made much of an art out of it yet. But who is it, may I ask again ? ”

“ The same : I'm not a bee.”

“ A—h—h ! ” Fortescue helped himself to a whisky. “ You're still in the goose-step, my boy, and you're—— How old are you ? ”

“ Oh, drop it ! How the devil was I to know that the tiger-drive was a blind ? ”

Another “ A—h—h ! ”

“ So he bagged other game, eh ? Poor old Colonel ! He was always good on strategical moves. Well, cheer up. Here's something to divert your thoughts for a few days, at least. Kay sent this over the wires this morning. Looks like a mare's-nest ; but, then, you know what he is.”

Grierson took the despatch and read :

“ Watch person calling himself Major Skew. Am warned that he is a spy, and with female, named Charlotte Bressane, has brought off coup. Every officer commanding who has made Skew's acquaintance must report personally details and explanations.”

“ Well, what do you think of it ? ”

Grierson threw the despatch back with a smile.

“ Seeing that they buried Skew yesterday, I don’t think you need waste any time watching. But I’ll be quite frank with you : I never liked the fellow from the first, and I’m not the only one who thinks that your indifference to his knocking about here at will was—well, a trifle indiscreet, to say the least of it.”

“ You’re awfully cheerful,” Fortescue growled in turn.

“ Yes, but we’re not so devilishly cute as you,” Grierson chuckled.

“ But if he’s dead and buried, where’s the fuss come in ? ”

“ I don’t say that he died intestate,” Grierson replied significantly. “ And there’s the lady, of course.”

“ Know her ? ”

Grierson nodded affirmatively.

“ Cute ? ”

“ And deuced smart with it. If you’re thinking things in that direction, don’t trouble. She’s not the weeping confession sort.”

“ What did Skew die of ? Whisky ? ”

"There's a mystery about the business. Appears he was found near the house of the lady, with a Service bullet in his brain. Young Graham Dennis—you know him: big fellow with a heavy jaw—was lying across his body, and raving like a coolie run amok. Everything pointed to Skew having committed suicide, but why he should do it no one seems to know. There's a sequel. Skew turns out to have been a brother of the lady you're worrying yourself about."

"You're a regular Blue-Book," said Fortescue admiringly. "Hullo! what is it?"

An orderly, at the attention, was standing on the veranda steps.

"Another despatch!" Captain Fortescue took the message and dismissed the man. Grierson was refilling the glasses while the other read, and he dropped the siphon with a crash as Fortescue wheeled round, an oath on his lips.

"My God! Grierson, this means trouble for some of us. Listen:

"TO CAPTAIN RANDOLPH FORTESCUE,
COMMANDING FORT T——

"A second anonymous communication received this morning states that Major Skew is in

possession of complete plans of ten forts, including your own [here followed the names of the forts], and that he is working in conjunction with a certain Count Cimea, who is attached to the S.I.D. of Neon. Take every possible step to ascertain truth or otherwise of statement. Seriousness of situation doubled by crisis briefly reported in 'Courier' to-day (p. 5, col. 1)."

Grierson emitted a long, low whistle.

"The devil! but the old man seems to have struck a busy correspondent."

Fortescue was silently contemplating the message in his hand. When he looked up again there was a troubled expression on his face.

"Send for a copy of the *Courier*," he said; and Grierson passed the order on to an orderly, who returned in a few minutes with the newspaper.

"Find it," said Fortescue abruptly, sinking into a chair.

Grierson eagerly turned over the pages.

"Whew! Listen to this:

" THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

"BRITAIN AND HER THANKLESS FOSTER-CHILD.

"Earl Blay, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, has addressed, we understand,

a strongly worded letter of protest to Neon's Foreign Secretary, in consequence of the remarkable speech made by an ex-statesman who undoubtedly wields great influence in that country. If the speech bears but a suspicion of the stamp of officialism, Earl Blay is amply justified in asking for—nay, demanding—an immediate explanation. If, on the other hand, the Government repudiates the speaker, Britain would be within her rights in insisting on a severe reprimand being administered to such a dangerous firebrand. Briefly, the ex-statesman urged his countrymen to extend the range of their already high ambitions, and tighten the bonds of sympathy which exist between them and the native races of India. European oppression, he said, was squeezing the life-blood out of the natives, who, like branded slaves, were crying aloud for succour. India under the rule of Neon, he said, would be a land of peace and contentment.

“Assuming,” the newspaper added, editorially, “that, through some awful and unforeseen contingency, India were at liberty to place herself in the hands of this Power, which we have reared from comparative barbarism, we wonder which of the two would be the more

anxious to get rid of the other at the end of twelve months. Is it not time that John Bull dropped the rôle of imperturbable papa and used the thick end of his slipper in the old-fashioned but salutary manner ? ”

“ ‘ Forty,’ ” said Grierson sententiously, “ what did I tell you three years ago, when we heard that the stork had brought us another baby ? ”

“ I don’t know,” replied Fortescue ungraciously, “ and I don’t care. What you can tell me now is how to get to the bottom of this business. It may be all moonshine, but the possibilities are disquieting. Who is this Count Cimea, anyway, and what the devil is he doing here at all ? Tell me that, Grierson, and don’t stand there like a hamstrung fencer.”

Fortescue was gradually working himself up into a temper.

“ My dear fellow——”

“ Oh, for God’s sake don’t ‘ dear ’ me, as if I were—the Colonel’s wife, but think of something—do something.”

“ I’d like to commence by pulling your nose,” Grierson retorted, “ but your hair’s too grey to dignify the proceeding. I suppose you want me to suggest that we send a

regiment down to arrest this young lady and search her house? About the most idiotic thing you could do in the circumstances."

"Why idiotic?"

"What proof have you that she is what the old man's correspondent says she is? And, assuming that she is, do you think she's fool enough to paper her boudoir with the plans? No, my dear fellow; all that you can do at present is to sit tight, keep your ears open and your eyes skinned, and don't advertise your trouble."

"A proceeding which the old man would term 'highly commendable,' " said Fortescue caustically.

"You can wager your reputation against a pinch of snuff that, if the plans were intended for the scrutiny of our dear neighbours in Neon, Skew's death won't prevent their getting them. And his death, by the way, assumes a new significance."

"If you'd stop theorizing and try to be a little more practical, I should value your assistance in the matter. What are we going to do to recover the plans? And what are we going to report to the old man if they are irrecoverable? I suppose you have an idea

what it will mean if they have been taken out of the country ? ”

“ Slight increase in next year’s Budget for extra military expenditure, reconstruction of forts, etc., I suppose,” Grierson drawled. “ But here’s Major Blayton, coming along like Nick in a high wind. Perhaps he can throw some light on the matter. Hullo, Blayton ! who’s the chitty you’re dodging ? ”

Major Blayton, of the Garrison Artillery, leaped from the saddle and spat the dust out of his mouth.

“ By Jove ! ” he gasped, “ anybody, to look at you fellows, would think you’d booked your passage home, and didn’t care a snap if it snowed. Why, the very deuce of a game’s on foot.”

“ Yes, yes ; we know all about it,” said Fortescue wearily. “ Sit down and tell us the latest.”

“ The latest ! From what I can gather, the thing’s as old as—as you, almost. You’ve heard from Kay, I suppose ? ”

Grierson nodded and pointed to the despatches.

“ So’ve we,” said Blayton, “ and I tell you what it is : the old boy is on a good thing this time, although they’ll kick him in the ribs at

home. See if they don't. But does anyone here know this Cimea ? ”

“ Met him once or twice,” replied Grierson. “ Skew used to bring him into the club. Short chap with a Darwinian pedigree, and carries a bundle of toothpicks behind his ears.”

“ What I can't understand,” said Blayton, going off at a tangent, “ is the slavishness of the people at home. Why should they allow a man like that to come out here and preach the gospel of rebellion to the niggers, for Winters tells me that has been his game ? ”

“ Seems to be a popular game, too,” said Grierson ironically, “ judging from the way in which some of our own people have taken to it lately.”

“ Egad,” said Blayton warmly, “ they'll have the sequel sooner than they anticipate. Had a letter yesterday from Wilding—you remember him, ‘ Forty ’—of the Lancers. He says that there is a restlessness among the native troops in Burmah that would turn the old man's hair grey if he knew of it. But they're afraid to squeal for fear of being jumped on by the people at home for raising a bogie.”

"You're an old woman," Fortescue snapped, "and so is Wilding."

"Fact!" Blayton shook his finger warningly. "You mark my words: these confounded agitators will not be happy until they've upset the whole country. They're like cockroaches on an old steamer—if you don't kill them in the morning, they'll have a family of followers by night. Wilding assures me that there is an ominous uneasiness among the troops, but it is impossible to get to the source of the mischief. They are growing insolent, and he had to knock one of the devils down on parade the other day because he refused point-blank to come to the salute."

"Bah!" Fortescue flung away his cigar and shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "There is nothing to be feared in that direction; it's the Neon business that worries me."

Blayton was obviously annoyed. "You forget," he expostulated, "that they are our——"

"Yes, I am aware of all that, my dear Blayton, but your knowledge of the world ought to remind you that a jealous friend is more to be feared than an avowed enemy.

I am convinced that there is an undercurrent in this flood of rumour that will require a good deal of fathoming. We shall not get into very deep water by sitting here arguing the pros and cons of diplomatic moves."

"Suggest a move," said Grierson.

"I'll move myself," Fortescue retorted. "If it's going to be a game of finesse, there'll be no need of a brass band and a town-crier. So you, Grierson, can clear out to your quarters, and neither do nor say anything until you get your cue. Blayton can do similar duty, and I'll go out and reconnoitre."

"Conceit rampant in its armour of grey hairs," quoth Grierson. "Come along, Blayton; the Empire hath no more need of us."

They went down the veranda steps arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER XX

LOVE AND DUTY

IN the Slaney-Dennis household the period of acute anxiety had passed. Graham had not only allayed the fears of the medical men that his reason had been impaired, but had brought a feeling of blessed comfort to his father by sitting up in bed and swearing roundly and easily at the punkah-wāla for dozing. And he had stilled the fears of his doting mother by requesting only a glance at a cocktail, if further indulgence were absolutely denied by the doctor.

Gradually a recollection of all that had led up to his collapse awakened, and, with that instinct which is common to us all, he turned to his mother for help in his darkness. And with the tenderness and solicitude of a mother she recalled the name that had lingered longest on his lips during the hours of his mental derangement.

“And her brother, the Major—you know, mother?”

“Yes, we all know now, Grahamy boy. You were found by his dead body in the mangrove avenue near the house, and during your illness you helped to clear up the mystery.”

"And she, Charlotte—how did she bear it all?"

"Heaven only knows! His death was terrible enough, in all conscience, but the mystery of the whole thing—why he committed suicide—must have driven her almost insane. His body was taken to her house. She met the bearers without a tear in her eyes—she must have nerves of steel—and preferred to remain alone with it in that awful house! Ugh! The very thought of it sends a beetle down my back."

"They did not allow her to remain alone, mother? You don't mean that?"

Mrs. Dennis shook her head despairingly.

"What could we do? If you had seen her! And they call women weak! During the whole of the time you have been lying here her 'boy' has never been off the veranda steps for an hour at a time. There is something she wants cleared up, and only you can help her."

"Yes, I can help her," he muttered vacantly, passing his hands over his eyes to collect his thoughts.

After a while he asked if she had called in person during his illness, and the knowledge that she had seemed to brighten him.

“ And I hardly knew her, Grahamy. Even in the midst of my own grief her poor white face wrung my heart. She has borne it all with a bravery that none can understand, and those who thought her callous had their answer the morning after her brother’s death. Your father and the police superintendent went up to Agra Nook to make inquiries. The ‘ boys ’ were not about, and as they could not get a reply to their knocking, they entered by the dining-room window, which had been left unshuttered. They found her in a dead swoon by the side of her brother, and holding his cold hand so tightly that they could scarcely release it.”

“ Poor Charlotte ! ” He turned his face away. “ I suppose—suppose,” he said falteringly, as though he feared the answer, “ I suppose she will return to Europe ? ”

Mrs. Dennis leaned over the bed and looked into his eyes.

“ Yes, I suppose so,” she replied. “ You would like to see her before she goes ? ”

He took his mother’s face between his hands and kissed her fondly. “ Well ? ” he queried.

“ She is here,” said Mrs. Dennis, smiling back at him ; “ she has been here two hours, awaiting your pleasure.” He closed his eyes

in a smile of contentment. She stopped and kissed his twitching lips and left the room. He counted her receding footsteps as a sick child counts the flowers on a papered wall. He heard her whispered words at the foot of the stairs, and then another footfall that quickened the blood in his veins.

“Grahamy boy!” She had stolen into the room so quietly that he was not aware of her presence until he felt her soft, warm hand in his. And when he opened his eyes and found her kneeling by his bedside, the sombre hue of mourning intensifying the pallor and sadness of her face, he could only stretch out his arms with a feeble, choking cry of “Charlotte! Charlotte!”

For a while they remained without another word being spoken. Then she gently smoothed the hair back from his brow, and “You knew that I would come, Grahamy?” she said.

“Yes, I knew,” he replied, drawing her face down to his.

“And you forgive me, boy?”

“Forgive you?” For a moment his face clouded in perplexity. “Ah, yes,” he said, as his memory cleared. “I played the coward. Poor little woman! How you must have despised me!”

“ No, not that word, Grahamy ; only——”

“ I know, I know ; but I was jealous, Charlotte—mad with jealousy and doubt.”

“ There was no ground for jealousy,” she whispered.

“ You forget,” he reminded her. “ I did not know that the Maj—that he was your brother ; nor had I the slightest suspicion that you——”

“ That I was a spy ? ” There was boldness in her voice that made him wince, but the ring of defiance was forced and unnatural. She saw the pained look in his eyes and hung her head.

“ What do you think of me now ? ” she asked in a broken voice. “ Don’t you despise me ? ”

He caught her arm and drew her face to the pillow again. “ Despise you ? ” he whispered huskily. “ Yes, see—he kissed her again and again—“ see,” he laughed ecstatically, “ see how I despise you ! ” She suffered herself to lie there in his embrace, and when his energy had exhausted itself she leaned over and kissed him with equal warmth.

“ You will let me tell you now, Graham ? It is not a long story, and when you have heard it you will understand. He was my only

brother, and when our father died he cared for me as no one else in the world could have done. He held a commission in one of the most fashionable regiments of the French army. In the quietude of our little home on the outskirts of the Bois de Boulogne he gave himself up to a deep and careful study of military tactics, defence-works, and the pregnability of foreign seaboard. Although he had resigned his commission, the military authorities never hesitated to seek his assistance in the elucidation of foreign manœuvres or the counteracting of strategical moves on the part of other countries.

“Then trouble intervened — desperate trouble. He was found guilty of the crime of a brother officer, who had killed himself at the moment of exposure. He had no proof, though he was utterly innocent. All the evidence was against him. My brother was cashiered—disgraced.

“Soon after, financial troubles followed—the last straw. He was compelled to take service again, this time in the Secret Intelligence Department of a foreign power. He stipulated only that he should never be required to undertake work against the interests of France—the country both of us

loved still. But why should we care about your country ?

“ He had imbued me with a keen interest in his work, and when he was ordered abroad the assistance that I could render him was obvious to both of us. I loved the work for the work’s sake and the fact that he loved me. It mattered not to me what the world might say, even if the world discovered my avocation. In all that I did I served my brother because of the love I bore him and the love he cherished for me. I served no Government—only him. Do you understand ? ”

“ Yes, I understand,” he replied ; and then in a low voice he told her all that had happened on that fateful night. She sobbed gently as he told her, but when he would have stayed the narrative she urged him to tell her all.

“ It was suicide,” he whispered, “ and yet it was something more. There is such a thing as suicide by suggestion. That is how your brother died. I would have ridiculed the idea before of a man possessing such power over another, but I know now. If you had seen Krishna’s eyes as I saw them that night you would understand.”

She shivered at the mention of the name and crept closer to him.

"I do understand," she said, and proceeded to tell him of Krishna's visit to Agra Nook.

"Great heavens!" he burst out, as he listened to her story, "what does it all portend? Charlotte, I believe that there is something terrible on foot. I have friends in the Service. Don't you think that we should seek their advice?"

"Graham"—she was trembling violently—"you forget that I—that——"

He caught his breath and drew her to him protectingly.

"You need not fear, sweetheart. Trust me—that is all I ask."

"But the plans, Graham? He—Krishna—has them. He threatened me with them."

"Forget that they existed, darling." He smiled.

With a cry of joy she clutched his arm. "You—you have them, Graham?"

He shook his head. "No; I suppose he has them, and he's welcome to them. Come," he cried, laughing at her rueful countenance, "can you not trust me? It will soon be cleared up, and when the clouds have passed

we will go away together, little woman, you and I. Eh ? ”

“ Together, Grahamy boy,” she whispered gladly.

Mrs. Dennis came into the room, and, with her customary tact, saw nothing that it was intended she should not see.

“ Captain Fortescue from the fort has called to see you, Graham, if you are—not too busy.”

Charlotte started up with a cry of alarm, but Graham put his arm about her and whispered a word of encouragement.

“ We will see him at once, mother,” he said.

CHAPTER XXI

MILITARY ACTIVITY

IN his embarrassment Captain Fortescue halted on the threshold and pulled the ends of his moustache with painful vigour. He glanced appealingly at Graham.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "but I did not gather from Mrs. Dennis that——"

"Pray, do not apologize," said Graham quickly. "Will you allow me? Charlotte, this is Captain Fortescue, commanding Fort T——. Captain, Miss Bressane, of Agra Nook, of whom, perhaps, you have heard."

The Captain lifted his eyebrows and turned a searching glance on Charlotte. "I have already been to Agra Nook this morning," he said, watching her narrowly. Graham felt her tremble, and pressed her fingers reassuringly.

"And you drew a blank, of course," she smiled.

"Of course," he repeated mechanically.

"You need not hesitate, Captain," Graham put in, perceiving his dilemma; "what concerns Miss Bressane equally concerns me."

"Indeed!" The Captain moved uneasily in his chair. "I am afraid that I am denied the pleasure of congratulating you," he said apologetically, "inasmuch as my visit is one

of, well—er—investigation, and congratulations might savour of irony.”

“Go on,” said Graham quietly.

The Captain stumbled. “But your health, Mr. Dennis?” he protested. “I confess that I came here on the heels of Miss Bressane. Perhaps she would not object to my speaking with her in private.”

“I’m afraid that I should,” Graham laughed. “We have no secrets from each other—now, and I assure you that you need have no fears on my account. I shouldn’t be lying here only—well, it’s comfortable.”

The Captain bowed gravely.

“The fact of the matter is that a somewhat important despatch has reached me from the Commander-in-Chief. The matter is an exceedingly delicate one, and I decided to make the preliminary inquiries myself, rather than trust the work to a subordinate. It may be that the Chief is pursuing a myth. If it is so, the less publicity given to it the better for all concerned. The despatch has reference to the late Major Skew, the brother, I understand, of——” And he bowed sympathetically to Charlotte. “It appears that an anonymous communication reached headquarters, and——”

“ Ah, I understand,” Graham interrupted. “ I think that I can simplify your investigations, Captain. Briefly, the despatch has reference to the work which the late Major Skew—or, rather, Moniseur Felix Pericard—carried on during his residence in India. The Commander-in-Chief has been warned that plans of certain fortifications were in the possession of Monsieur Pericard, and that this lady, his sister, was instrumental to an extent in obtaining those plans. Am I right ? ”

“ Your knowledge of the facts astounds me,” the Captain confessed.

“ I do not doubt it,” said Graham dryly, “ and I think that I shall astound you even more before you leave. May I inquire what steps you intend to take in the matter ? ”

“ Are they not obvious ? ”

“ In nowise. No doubt one less experienced than yourself would have premeditated the arrest of Miss Bressane, but the futility of such a proceeding must be patent to your mind. What charge could you bring against this lady, and if you arrested her what evidence of espionage is likely to be forthcoming ? ”

The Captain frowned.

“ We have proof,” he ventured at random,

“ that plans of these fortifications are actually in existence, and the area of their circulation has been narrowed down. You are an Englishman, and perhaps this will suggest to your mind what it will mean if those plans get into the hands of another Power, no matter what the attitude of that Power towards Great Britain at the present moment.”

He handed Graham a copy of the *Courier*.

“ I quite appreciate your position, Captain,” said Graham, handing the paper back to him. “ *If* those plans are in existence, there is an anxious time in store for the Captains commanding and the officers attached to those particular forts; but if they are *not* in existence, how then ? ”

The Captain was leaning forward, his lips parted in astonishment.

“ You could acquaint the Commander-in-Chief,” Graham went on, “ that your investigations had revealed the fact that M. Pericard was dead. The only other person upon whom a breath of suspicion could rest will shortly become my wife, and before another month has elapsed she will be on her way to England with me. Captain Fortescue, I can give you my word as an Englishman—an Englishman whose love for the dignity and welfare of his

country is not less than your own—that, although detailed plans of ten of the most important fortifications in this country were actually obtained under the noses of British officers, they do not exist to-day.”

The Captain stared incredulously, and a faint cry of relief broke from Charlotte’s lips.

“ But how—how can you prove it ? ” the Captain stammered.

“ I will tell you,” said Graham ; and for the second time that day he related the incidents of his adventure in the house of Kuppuswamy, and the finding of Monsieur Pericard’s dead body and the original plans.

“ And because I am an Englishman,” he concluded warmly, “ and because I love my country, I destroyed them while I had strength. There are two other sets of plans in existence, but they are of less value than the paper on which they are drawn. Now, are you satisfied, Captain ? ”

“ Yes, thank God ! ” was the fervent reply. “ You may not be a soldier, sir, but—but, by heavens ! you ought to be.”

And having paid what he honestly believed to be the greatest compliment that could be paid to a civilian, he reached over and gripped Graham’s hand.

“ But, Captain ”—Graham lowered his voice—“ if one danger is averted there is another, and a more serious, that must be grappled with at once. From what I have told you of this midnight conference there can be no doubt in your mind that some deep scheme is being hatched by this emissary of the Neon Government and certain native agitators, including Krishna, the foster-son of Kuppuswamy, for whom I cherished affection born of admiration. His genius would have compelled the admiration of any man, no matter what his nationality. What this scheme is I have not the slightest idea, but we stand a good chance of finding out if we work quickly and without making public the information that we already possess. Cimea is the man who must be detained without delay. Do you agree ? ”

Captain Fortescue hesitated, but the natural repugnancy to enlisting the aid of a civilian in any undertaking lingered only a moment.

“ I agree,” he said, “ and I need not say how much your assistance will be appreciated. Cimea must be found, and I will give instructions for an officer at once to wait upon him at his hotel. Oh yes, I know the man, and

from what I learned this morning he is still in the city, I am placing complete reliance on your story, and whatever the responsibility in arresting the subject of a friendly Power merely on suspicion, I'm willing to take it."

"You will confront him with me?"

"It will be necessary, and if you are unable to leave your bed——"

"Leave my bed! Ye gods! Arrest him, Captain, and, that done, you will find me ready. Why! I feel as strong as a tub of ammonia."

The Captain turned to Charlotte.

"Adieu," he said gallantly. "I cannot express the pleasure I feel at having been relieved of a painful duty. When you have lived in England only a little while, you will understand the pride and loyalty of those who can rightly claim it as their native land. And you will find, as I have found, that, although beyond the belt of water that washes its seaboard it is maligned and ridiculed with impunity, there is not a dearer nor a sweeter little island in the whole wide world."

And with a sharp jerk of his iron-grey head and a perceptible quiver of the stern, straight lips, he turned and left.

An hour later an orderly brought the following note to Graham :

“ C. disappeared ; also K. If able, come to fort at four.

“ R. F.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE TREASURE OF THE DEAD

WHEN Graham arrived at the fort, he found Captain Fortescue deeply engrossed in a railway time-table. His friend Captain Grierson was walking about the room relating some episode in which the "Flagrante delicto," "devilish luck," supplied Graham with the context, for he was familiar with the reputation of the military Lothario. Both officers were in mufti.

"The birds have flown!" Fortescue cried, looking up from the time-table and kicking a rattan chair in Graham's direction; "but your friend the Count left something useful in his cage. Look at this—picked it up in his room at the Visitors'."

"This" was an ordinary Tourists' Guide to Places of Interest in India. The book opened at the "M's," the corner of the page having been turned down. The town of Mercara, Coorg, had evidently interested the reader, for down the margin ran a line of ink dots, suggesting that, pen in hand, he had checked each line as he read.

"Well, do you gather anything from that?" Fortescue queried. "If you don't, perhaps this scrap of paper, found in the fireplace,

will assist you further." Graham took the paper and examined it with a perplexed look on his face. It seemed to him that someone had been working out a mathematical problem, and an ink smudge where the pen had stuck in the rough fibre doubtless accounted for the careless rejection of the paper.

"Did you ascertain when the Count left the city?" asked Graham, looking up.

"He settled his chits at nine o'clock this morning, and gave orders for his traps to be sent down to the Neon Shipping Agency."

"And Krishna?"

"Heaven only knows! The old fellow Kuppuswamy has been in communication with his gods for a couple of days—so his 'boys' tell me—but they don't appear to have told him much."

"I think I grasp the turn events have taken," said Graham, turning his attention again to the scrap of paper.

"Fairly obvious to me," said Fortescue airily, "after the treasure-trove yarn you related this morning. Let's hear your theory—see if it coincides with mine."

"Whatever the scheme, the Count's interest in it has evaporated?"

"Correct. Go on,"

"He is only human, and avarice is natural to all of us?"

The Captain nodded.

"And having solved to his satisfaction the riddle of the cryptogram, with the assistance, of course, of the clues supplied at the conference, he is now on his way to Mercara to prove his higher intellectuality by taking over the Chancellorship of the Exchequer?"

"Grierson," said Fortescue severely, "never let me hear you speak a word in disparagement of a civilian's comprehension. Mr. Dennis, if you have not already had the misfortune to meet him, this is Captain Grierson, of the Royals. He is fully acquainted with the details of the undertaking we have on hand, and his services will be indispensable. What he doesn't know of Hindustani is spoken only by a Tamil coolie whose morals have been corrupted by your English planters. By the way, Mr. Dennis, are you prepared for the journey to Mercara? The sooner we deal with this matter the better. The Count must be run to earth, and his arrest will, I think, burst the bubble that is worrying us a little."

“Quite ready, Captain,” Graham smiled, “and at your service.”

“Very well, gentlemen ; we’ll get away to Mercara, and on the way down we can wrestle with the clues.”

A telegram was despatched to a friend of Grierson’s, advising him of the time of their expected arrival at Mysore, and requesting the loan of his car to take them over the remaining seventy-five miles to Mercara.

“Grierson, you know the district of Mercara fairly well, I believe ? ”

Grierson had stretched himself on the carriage-seat, and was lazily working out the chances of the various entries for the Viceroy’s Cup. He glanced reproachfully at Fortescue.

“Please don’t recall things that are better forgotten,” he pleaded. “I was as green as a dock-leaf, and she—well, you know what she was.”

“My dear Grierson, your thoughts seem to run in only one groove. I want to know something of the geography of the place. I’ve never been there in my life ; neither has Dennis.”

“Sorry ! Where are you stuck ? ”

Fortescue handed over the written words that Graham had heard fall from the lips of

poor Lakshmi. "If there's anything in it," he added, "the thing must be as simple as daylight to anyone who knows the district."

Grierson took the paper and read it again and again. "Yes," he drawled, in a bored tone, "the thing's too damned simple, and I warn you, 'Forty,' that if you've brought me down on a fool's errand, knowing the risks I run in certain quarters, you'll never hear the last of it."

"Translate it, Diogenes, and don't wash your linen in a railway-carriage. You don't suppose we've come down here to look for treasure, do you? We've come to look for the man who's looking for it."

"I'll sketch the thing out for you, if you like. Lend me your pencil. See, here is the old fort, now converted into Government offices; in the foreground are the tennis-courts. (Gad! I can see her now, with eyes as big as moons, and a mouth no man could resist.) Now, right in front of the tennis-courts is the Rajah's palace, also converted to better uses in the interests of the Commissioner."

"And the tomb?"

"Um, the tomb? Now, where the devil is

the tomb? Don't remember the Commissioner using anything of the sort as a stable; in fact, I don't think you'll find anything like one in his grounds. Of course, there's the Gadiga, the tombs of the ancient Rajahs—two buildings, and they're at the extreme end of the main bazaar. Um, no, I can't go any farther from memory. We may pick up a few landmarks when we get there. Meanwhile, we'll have a nap." And he spread his sporting paper over his face and slept peacefully.

They reached Mysore at sundown, after what had seemed to Graham an endless journey. Grierson's friend proved his friendship by sending his native chauffeur to the station with his car. They sent the chauffeur into the town with a ten-rupee note in his pocket, telling him to be at the station the next morning and await their return. Grierson, who once upon a time had endangered the life of every living thing in the neighbourhood of Mayfair with his knowledge of driving, undertook the duties of chauffeur.

They reached the outskirts of Mercara by a miracle, and leaving the car in the bullock-shed of a native farmer, whom Grierson terrified into allegiance by a string of awful

threats in Hindustani, they proceeded on foot in the direction of the fort.

The darkness was unusually intense, and the valley mists hung around the hill-top town like a white mantle. In the lowlands twinkled the ryots' cocoanut-oil lamps, like so many fireflies on a marsh. Grierson led the way. His amours of the past had not been so lightly forgotten as he would have had his intimates believe. He picked his way through rice-paddy and plantation with the sureness of a mountain mule, swearing softly to himself the while for being "fooled into the hunt." They might have been phantoms crossing the graveyard of a Roman host. Beyond the burning wicks of the ryots' lamps there was not a sign to remind them that they were in the land of a living people.

When they reached the Commissioner's house it was in darkness, and in the grounds could be heard only the lazy drone of insect life.

"'Forty,'" Grierson whispered, "have you ever spent a holiday in the Morgue? By Jove! you have a genius for arranging interesting trips. Dennis, do you see anything in the shape of a tomb? I'm hanged if I can."

"Let's try the Gadiga," Graham suggested. "If Cimea came down to Mercara, you may be sure that he's been in the locality, and we know quite well that he can't clear out before morning. It's not likely that he'll go back to Mysore to-night, and even if he should do so, Mysore isn't Charing Cross."

"We'll try the tombs, Grierson," said Fortescue peremptorily; "and for Heaven's sake keep out of those rice-paddies. I smell like a polecat already."

Grierson stepped out with a grunt, and in a short while the gloomy piles loomed up through the darkness. Suddenly the leader stopped, stepped back, and clutched Graham's arm.

"Do you see anything?" he whispered, pointing in the direction of a low-lying mangrove-clump to the east of the tombs. The dark figure of a man was moving stealthily towards the buildings.

"It's a nig," said Grierson in a whisper; "you can tell by the stoop of the shoulders; but he's not wearing dhoti, or he'd move faster and bend lower."

"A ryot?" Fortescue suggested.

Grierson shook his head doubtfully. "A ryot doesn't pay night visits to old tombs.

He's generally too busy frightening away the devil at home. But keep quiet and give this fellow his head ; he'll finish somewhere."

They crouched in the undergrowth and waited. Unsuspectingly, the figure passed within ten yards of the three, and the single glance they obtained of him as he passed confirmed Grierson's assertion that he was a native. The darkness enwrapped him before he reached the tombs, so they were left in doubt that he was actually going there.

The doubt was soon dispelled. Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed when an awful nerve-rending scream broke through the stillness of night, and went echoing and re-echoing round the silent hills, until it died away in a plaintive wail of agony.

"Come on !" cried Grierson, springing to his feet, his whole frame quivering with excitement at the prospect of immediate adventure. They raced across the intervening space to the dark, forbidding, bat-haunted Valhalla of ancient India's dead.

Grierson was the first to enter, and he started back with a low cry of amazement. For a moment Graham could not distinguish a single object, but a sickening, musty odour of things long dead assailed his nostrils and

prevented his breathing freely. Then the blackness softened to his vision, and he made out the sombre, mouldy tombs, standing in irregular lines, like secret treasure-chests of the dead.

“What is that?” It was Grierson who spoke, but his voice was so strained that Graham could hardly recognize it.

The covering slab of one of the tombs at the extreme end of the building had been moved out of the square of the uprights, and through an aperture scarcely wide enough to admit the body of a man of average girth a faint white light streamed.

“Go on,” Fortescue whispered hoarsely, moving forward.

Graham followed, with his revolver drawn. Grierson stumbled over a broken urn and barked his shins against the projecting masonry of a vault. His hearty expletive relieved the tension on their nerves. They stopped dead to await any response to the noise, but none came, and they crept nearer to the open tomb. Simultaneously they peered over the edge, and simultaneously a cry of horror broke from their lips.

A short flight of roughly-hewn steps led to the floor of the vault, which was nine or

ten feet square. On a low daïs against the eastern wall was a sarcophagus, newly opened, the gruesome relics of the dead having been ruthlessly disturbed by sacrilegious hands. Lying across the stone coffin, the face turned upwards and horror staring out of the narrow, glassy eyes, was the man they knew as Count Cimea ! From their position they could not determine the manner of his death, but the mystery of the white light that streamed from his breast was easily explained by Graham. In the agonies of dying the man had clutched at his chest and gripped the tiny battery that fed the electric scarf-pin used, Graham recollected with a shudder, the night Monsieur Pericard's desk was rifled.

A few feet away, and lying prone on his face, his arms doubled up beneath his body, was a native in European dress, doubtless the one they had seen stealing towards the tombs. The carved hilt of a knife protruded from his shoulders.

Fortescue climbed through the aperture, closely followed by the others. Ignoring the body of the native, he made for that of the Count, and had actually stretched out his hand with the intention of drawing the body to the floor, when a hoarse whisper of " Don't

move, for God's sake ! " held him motionless. A second later and the loud report of a revolver-shot brought down a cloud of stifling dust on their heads.

" Thanks ! " said Fortescue simply, turning and giving Graham's hand a wring. His cheeks were white and he was breathing hard.

" A ripping shot in a bad light," said Grierson critically, bending over the sarcophagus and lifting up gingerly the grim white-hooded snake, the head of which had been shattered by the revolver-shot.

" Whew ! " Fortescue whistled, " a deuced near thing. I've laughed at the yarns of the *nulla pambu* guarding the treasure of the dead, but—— See ! look here ! "

He pointed to the throat of the dead Count, where a small dark bruise no larger than a shilling appeared.

" Search him," said the practical Grierson.

Only a sheet of paper, containing the cryptic message with which they were already acquainted, was found in the pockets, and on the reverse side was a carefully executed plan of the tombs and a rough survey of the surrounding district.

" Turn the other fellow over, Dennis, if

you've no objection," said Grierson, adding apologetically : " I never touch the beggars, on principle."

With a quick movement Graham turned the body face upwards.

" Why this is Rhandi," he exclaimed—"one of the Hindus I told you about, Captain."

" The mystery is fizzling out," said Fortescue. " The Neon fellow, as I theorized, played the traitor and came here after the treasure——"

" Which amounts to a pile of bones," Grierson interposed.

" And the native played the spy and came after him. Neon got in the first blow, and the gentleman in the white hood got the second. By Jove ! didn't the beggar yell ? Well, Dennis, the night's adventure is at an end."

" No, Captain, not at an end—far from it. See ! "

Graham had seized the hands of the dead native, and tore them away from the open clothing into which he had tried to thrust them even in the agonies of dying. Each hand grasped a sheaf of dark, dried palm-leaves.

" The secret scheme ? "

Fortescue asked the question in a whisper.

Graham, in his excitement, could only nod and beckon to him to bring the human torch nearer. Quickly he prised open the fingers, already stiffening in death, and handed the mysterious leaves to Grierson.

"You can read them?" he queried feverishly.

Grierson held them up to the light with the idle curiosity of a curio-hunter.

"Simple enough," he muttered—"only an old form of letter-writing. This one relates to—to—to the will . . . of . . . Silva. . . . Um, it talks about the wealth of generations. . . . Curse the light!"

"The other—read the other," cried Graham, unable to control himself. "That refers to the treasure which we know now to be a myth."

Grierson held the other leaves up to the light and examined them carefully. Presently his air of indifference vanished, and horror was depicted in every line of his face.

"My God!" he gasped, "this is awful—devilish."

"Read it—read it, man!" cried Fortescue angrily.

And there in the eerie stillness of the house of the dead, his voice hollow and dry and

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unnatural, Captain Grierson read aloud the following terrible message, addressed to "The Brave Hearts of India":

"Brothers in bondage, slaves of the tyrannous West, the days of your servitude are ended. No longer shall ye writhe in agony beneath the heel of the oppressor. For the strength that is given ye shall be wielded in defence of your homes and your women and your children. Is it not written that the East shall rise again from the ashes of its past greatness, and cover the earth as our mighty rivers in flood-time? Too long have ye cringed, submissive, before the whips of the weaker. The brave hearts that struck for your deliverance when ye men of to-day were in childhood call to ye from the tomb to strike again.

"And ye shall strike—the weak with the strong—for the woes of your women will knit your sinews, and the cries of your starving offspring strengthen your hearts and pale the fear of death. For one has arisen from among ye who will lead ye unscathed through the blood and smoke of battle to the heaven that awaits the faithful. When the time is ripe his voice will roll through the land as the thunder rolls in the hollow of the hills, and ye shall gird on

your steel and go forth like men to cast off for ever the hateful yoke of the tyrants.

“ Fear not the guns of your compatriots, though turned upon ye from the forts of the enemy. Fear not their shining steel when in battle array they come upon ye as the beasts of the Western Ghats on the helpless fawns. For their guns will be as playthings and their steel as reed. The worldly wealth of many generations hath provided for it. He who has risen will pay the price. He knows where the wealth lies hidden. Mark well the positions in the fight that have been allotted ye, and flinch not when ye hear his voice. Let those whose blood is thin stand aside for those who fear not. Strike hard and sicken not like women when the rivers flow red. For all must die. So it is written, and ye dare not defy your gods. They will be with ye, and those who fall will fall with the light of immortality in their eyes.

“ And it is written that if he who has been Chosen shall so will it another nation may cross the waters of the world and stand by ye in the field, counselling ye with their unfettered learning, cheering ye with the wondrous tale of freedom they have won.

“ And here are the plans of battle that the wise dead prepared for ye. Mark them well and

not one person can escape your vengeance. In their graves the dead will listen for the clash of your steel, and chant with ye in the hour of your victory. Await his voice. The eyes of the dead are upon ye."

As Grierson uttered the last word the leaves fluttered to the floor of the vault. The faces of the three were bloodless.

"Great heavens!" Fortescue muttered; "another Mutiny!"

Grierson was the first to pull himself together, and, picking up the leaves, he placed them in his wallet.

"A lot of damned twaddle!" he growled—"written by a fanatic for fanatics, but quite sufficient to cause trouble."

Graham pointed to the body of Rhandi.

"How did he become possessed of them, I wonder? I remember how jealously Krishna guarded them."

"He looted them, no doubt," said Fortescue, spurning the body with his foot, "and came on the same errand as that other scoundrel."

"And when Krishna discovers his loss?"

"He will realize his danger and go to ground like a fox."

“ And he may strike in desperation if there is a semblance of truth in that thing, and the native troops have been worked upon by the sedition-mongers. There is not a moment to lose.”

“ We’ll get back without delay,” said Fortescue decisively, “ and I’ll wire to headquarters from Mysore.”

.

When they reached Mysore a telegram from Major Blayton awaited Captain Fortescue :

“ Return at once. City natives in open rebellion, led by fanatic named Krishna, said to be medical student.”

And the reply that Fortescue sent ran :

“ Keep all native officers under strict surveillance and quell disturbance at any cost. Inform headquarters have discovered second Mutiny plot, but cannot say how far it has spread.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FATE OF KRISHNA

THE city was in tumult, the additional terror of darkness approaching. It was the second night of the rising. From the native quarter came a low ominous roar, like the booming of the surf on a bleak and broken coast. In a dozen places the blood-red glare of fire shot upwards to the heavens to the accompaniment of frenzied yells from the horde that had broken loose. Howling and shrieking, like beasts in mortal agony, they surged through the narrow streets, the mounted police behind, all grime and sweat and bespattered with blood ; in front, the sunburnt garrison artillery, like a line of rocks, against which an ocean of revolt might beat itself to pieces.

“ Death to the tyrants ! Blood for blood ! ”
The cry rose and fell and rose again, like the howl of hungry wolves.

A squad of police had galloped round the European residences :

“ Keep within your doors : the natives have risen ! ”

And doors were barred and windows shuttered. White-faced men gathered their families together, and, while whispering

assurances that the military would soon quell the rising, quietly slipped weapons into their pockets.

Graham Dennis had reached home, and Charlotte, who abandoned her bungalow at the first warning of the outbreak, had sought refuge in the Slaney-Dennis house. From the balcony they commanded a view of the city beneath, and the hoarse cries of the struggling masses floated up to them on the tongue of every breeze.

An orderly from the fort dashed past the house.

"What news?" Graham shouted.

"Bad!" he yelled back. "Hindus have joined hands with Mohammedans. The Forty-Second's turning out."

A moment later Major Blayton, at the head of fifty troopers, went by at the gallop.

"Do you think the rising is general, Graham?"

Charlotte was clinging to him, and as the screams of the wounded rioters followed the rattle of the rifle-fire, he could feel her trembling.

"No, sweetheart," he whispered—"only local. All other towns have reported 'quiet.'"

The plot, if plot there really was, has been nipped in the bud."

"And Krishna?"

"Ah, I wonder! The treachery of the other two must have broken his heart. Perhaps, when he heard of it, he determined to strike whatever blow he could."

"Then you think this rising owes its inception to his exhortations?"

"I wish I could think otherwise. He is only one of a band of fanatics, but he is the most dangerous."

"And the other—Cimea?"

"That danger is shelved, at least. God grant that it will be a warning to the most dangerous of all fanatics—the untravelled politician at home, who would form an alliance with the devil if he donned a martyr's crown."

"Ugh! It is terrible! Hark!"

Another volley, followed by groans and howls and shrieks.

"Look! Look!"

The moon had burst through the clouds, and lighted up the scene of carnage in the disordered city. The rebellious natives had been rounded up like so many steers, and were rocking and swaying. One of their number

had been hoisted on a platform, which rested on the heads of a dozen stalwart Hindus. The light wind caught the flowing dhoti ; his head was thrown forward, his arms were waving in wild gesticulation. And as he screamed his exhortations, he turned his head so that the moonlight streamed full upon his features.

“ Krishna ! ” Graham whispered, peering through the night-glasses ; “ I am sure of it. His figure—his attitude—the poise of his head—— O God ! ”—the infantry had fired a volley—“ he’s down—killed ; no, he’s on his knees, urging them on.”

Slowly, and like dense walls mechanically moved, the soldiers were closing in. Unless the rioters threw down their weapons, a terrible slaughter must ensue. Yet still their loud cries of defiance mingled with the cries of the dying. And again the rifles spat like fuming beasts, and the sabres of the mounted police whirled and flashed and cut and hacked.

The end came as it was bound to come. Crushed like reeds before the winds of March, the natives reeled and tottered and shivered and fell, and the awful pandemonium sank to a whisper of what it had been. Beaten and

cowed, they fell on their knees in supplication or crawled into the shadows to nurse their wounds. A bugle sang in the night air, and slowly the infantry moved back into line. Their work was over. They wiped their grimed faces with the back of their hands, and bandied jests with the lightness of a shooting-party newly returned from a part-ridge-drive. Then came the quick word of command, and with a rhythmical swing they turned towards the fort.

Graham dropped his glasses. "I'm going down," he said.

Charlotte touched his arm.

"To seek him, Graham?"

He nodded.

"If you go, I go." He hesitated a second, but he knew how determined she could be.

"Very well," he said quietly; "there is no danger now."

"And even if it were dangerous, do you think I should allow you to go alone?"

He smiled and drew her to him tenderly. "We will go together, little woman," he said.

When they reached the streets, firemen were cleaning the pavements with their hose, and

policemen were riding hither and thither, snapping out commands in an authoritative tone. In the broad business avenue, where the rioters had surrendered, little knots of ambulance men and women were at work.

“ Hi, Dennis ! ”

Graham turned quickly at the call, and Captain Fortescue, almost the colour of a native after his night's work, galloped up.

“ Hot job, eh ? ” he laughed. “ Gad ! but the beggars were as stubborn as mules.”

“ Many casualties, Captain ? ”

“ Only a hundred or so. Sorry, of course ” —he bowed to Charlotte—“ but it's no good trying to frighten a crowd like that with blank cartridges.”

“ And the ringleaders ? ”

“ There seems to have been only one real leader, and he's lying on the pavement, third turning on the right. He's done for, so we left him.”

“ Come on,” said Graham, taking Charlotte's arm. “ Good night, Captain.”

“ Good night to you. Run up and see me to-morrow, will you ? ” And he turned his horse's head and galloped off.

They found Krishna at the spot indicated by the Captain. He was lying back in the

arms of Kuppuswamy, his head pillowed on the old man's breast, his eyes heavy and glassy, his life-blood streaming from a dozen wounds. Lakshmi was crouching at his feet, her head bowed in prayer, and round about a dozen natives were stretched prostrate, muttering their invocations.

" Krishna ! Krishna ! Do you know me ? " Graham was kneeling by the side of the dying man. " It is Graham. You know me ? "

There was no sign of recognition in the fast-closing eyes, but the lips moved as in a smile.

" You speak to him, Charlotte," Graham whispered huskily ; and she bent down and called him by name. Again the lips moved.

" Lakshmi ! " he whispered.

Then the long, attenuated limbs shivered in the convulsions of death, stretched, and were still.

And the frail little Lakshmi at the feet threw herself on the breast of her dead, and with a wild sob, in which grief and joy were strangely blended, cried :

" Krishna ! Krishna ! my Krishna ! "

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